Isaac Asimov MORE THINKING ABOUT THINKING

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

NOVEMBER

THE BLACK CURRENT by Ian Watson

Robert F. Young

Richard Mueller

John Morressy

AC JHNE213NWII7 11 FA NOV85
ELEANOR JOHNSON
213 N WILTON PL
LOS ANGELES CA 90004

0 58370 11

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SF&F

"This newest chapter in the story of Vandarei is beautifully executed, a rare fantasy..."
—Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine

This is the tale of a love that shattered a world, between a woman destined to be queen and the young man who stole her heart with the magic of his music. WHEN VOIHA WAKES, set in the enchanted land of Vandarei—the setting for Joy Chant's fantasy classics RED MOON AND BLACK MOUNTAIN and THE GREY MANE OF MORNING—is the crowning achievement of her remarkable creation. Rarely has a realm of fantasy, its history and customs, its culture and its people, been so richly and vividly evoked.

BANTAM BOOKS Now on Sale. $2.50

WHEN VOIHA WAKES

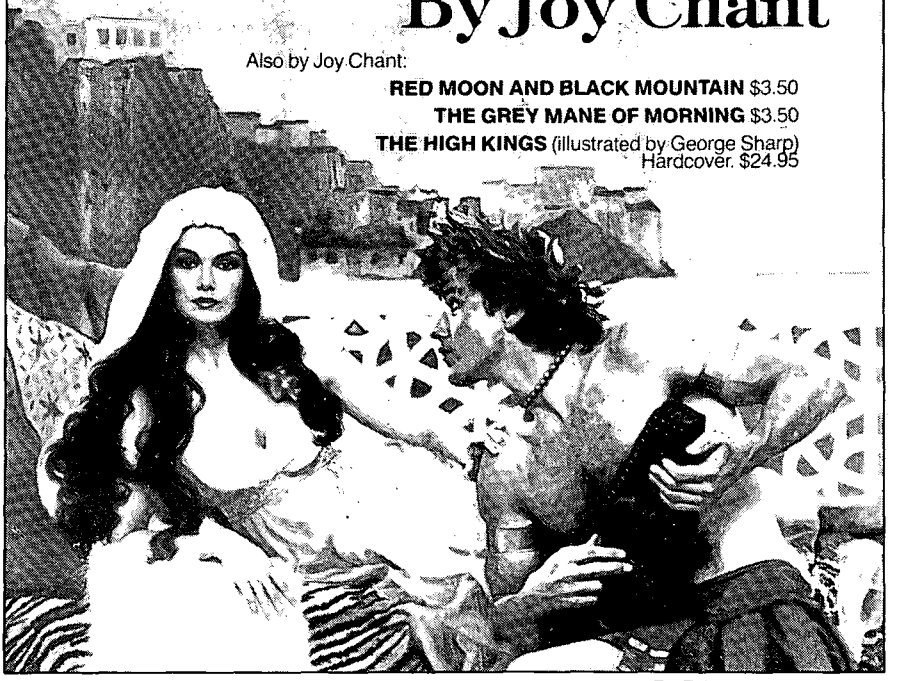
By Joy Chant

Also by Joy Chant:

RED MOON AND BLACK MOUNTAIN $3.50

THE GREY MANE OF MORNING $3.50

THE HIGH KINGS (illustrated by George Sharp) Hardcover. $24.95



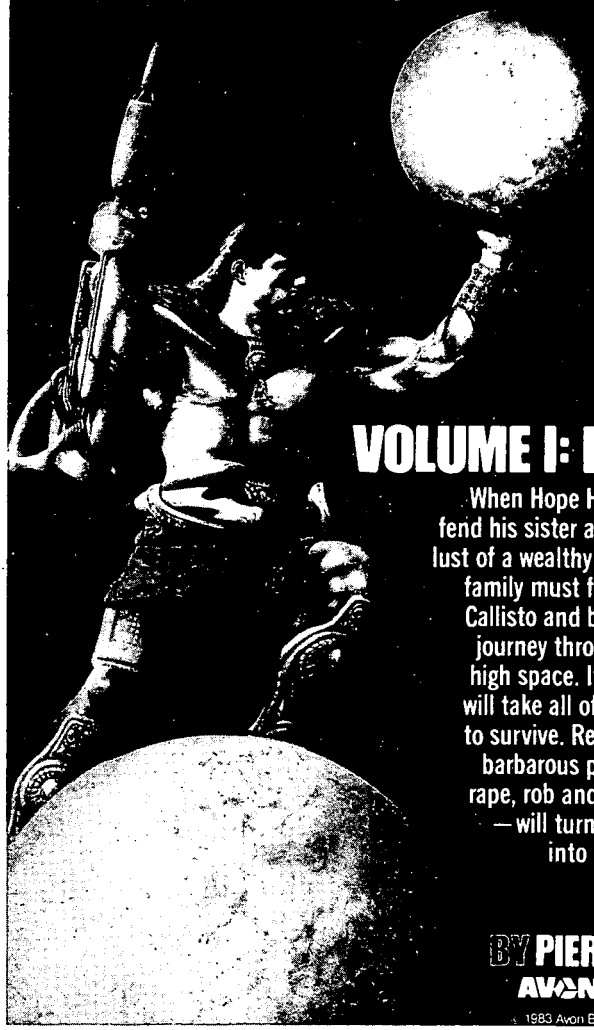
Bantam Science Fiction and Fantasy: The Best of All Possible Worlds.

BANTAM BOOKS, INC., 666 Fifth Avenue, New York 10103
BANTAM BOOKS CANADA, INC., 60 St. Clair Avenue East, Suite 601, Toronto, Ontario M4T 1N5

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BIO OF A SPACE TYRANT

HE HAS ONE BURNING DESIRE— TO AVENGE THE ATROCIOUS SLAUGHTER HE CAN NEVER FORGET.



VOLUME I: REFUGEE

When Hope Hubris dares to defend his sister against the violent lust of a wealthy scion, he and his family must flee their home on Callisto and begin a dangerous journey through the terrors of high space. It is a journey that will take all of Hope's ingenuity to survive. Repeated attacks by barbarous pirates—men who rape, rob and murder for sport—will turn an innocent waif into a killer. A king. An interstellar terror.

BY PIERS ANTHONY

AVON Paperback $2.95

© 1983 Avon Books, The Hearst Corporation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy & Science Fiction

Including VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

NOVEMBER • 35th Year of Publication

NOVELETS

THE BLACK CURRENT	5	**Ian Watson**
THE CHAPARRAL	72	**David Weiner**
NIGHTMARE, WITH ANGEL	104	**Stephen Gallagher**

SHORT STORIES

IMPERSONATIONS	45	**M. Coleman Easton**
AFTERNOON UNDER GLASS	53	**O. Niemand**
NOTHING TO LOSE; NOTHING TO KICK	62	**John Morressy**
THE LOST EARTHMAN	94	**Robert F. Young**
A SONG FOR JUSTIN	143	**Richard Mueller**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	38	**Algis Budrys**
"WE CANNOT ESCAPE HUMILITY" (Verse)	44	**Robert Frazier**
FILMS: 2-D 3-D	91	**Baird Searles**
SCIENCE: More Thinking About Thinking	131	**Isaac Asimov**

CARTOONS: NURIT KARLIN (37), JOSEPH FARRIS (61)

COVER BY DAVID HARDY FOR "THE BLACK CURRENT"

EDWARD L. FERMAN, Editor & Publisher — ISAAC ASIMOV, Science Columnist
DALE FARRELL, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Business Manager
ALGIS BUDRYS, Book Review Editor
Assistant Editors: ANNE JORDAN, BECKY WILLIAMS

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 65, No. 5, Whole No. 390; Nov. 1983. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.75 per copy. Annual subscription $17.50; $19.50 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 20%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

Copyright © 1983 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ian Watson has been writing innovative and compelling SF since at least 1973, when his first novel, THE EMBEDDING, was published. His short fiction has appeared in F&SF from time to time, most recently "Slow Birds" in the June 1983 issue. This is the first of a four part series, an exciting tale about a world that is split by a mighty river and a mysterious alien creature that blocks the midstream...

The Black Current

BY

IAN WATSON

From time immemorial no boat has crossed the river on account of the black current. Yet of course that does not stop us from plying our trade up and down the eastern shoreline, all the way from Ajelobo in the south down to Umdala in the north, where the river fattens out vastly, becoming salt not fresh, and storm-tossed. And it had always been my ambition as a little girl in dusty Pecawar — almost midway along the axis of our navigation — to join the boating guild and be a river-woman.

And why not? reasoned my parents. Or at least that's the brave face they put on my decision (or so I thought at the time). I wouldn't remain on the river forever, but would be bound to find myself a man sooner or later somewhere along those seven hundred leagues of shore between north and south, and bring him home to Pecawar to settle him there to raise our family, and probably settle with him — just as other girls took passage in the spring and returned in the autumn with a newly claimed husband. In my case it might simply take a little longer, but surely I would tire of wanderlust. The river, though richly varied from the southern jungles to the cold northern marshes, is hardly infinite. So after five or six years of sailing up and down it, I ought to be all too familiar with change for its own sake.

My twin brother, Capsi, as though perversely determined to play west to my north and south, had set his heart on joining the tiny monkish fraternity of observers down in the town of Verrino fifty leagues to the north; about whom we knew little enough in Pecawar, apart from the mere fact of their existence — but this was enough for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Capsi. From an early age he had peered through a succession of homemade spyglasses over the league and a half of river — beyond the black current that streams midway — at the western shore, even though this is quite blank and barren opposite Pecawar.

I myself had no interest at all in the western shore. Nor did anyone else I knew of, apart from Brother Capsi and those obsessives in Verrino. Why should we be interested in what was unattainable and incommunicative, and that had no effect whatever on our lives, nor had had for as far back as records went?

But all this changed subtly when, at seventeen, the very minimum age, I applied for membership in the Boating Guild, and so learned their first guarded secret, the very knowledge of which I was sworn, upon *The Book of the River*, to keep secret: namely, that one did not merely sign on, but must be initiated.

"But what *sort* of initiation is it?" I asked the quaymistress in her clapboard office down on the waterfront, after I had sworn and been told. For I associated the word *initiation* with strange painful rituals up in the Ajelo-Ilo tropics.

"Child, do you wish to travel as passenger, or crew?"

"Crew, of course."

"Then you must be initiated, whatever form this takes." The quaymistress laughed, and tossed her sun-bleached hair. She was a handsome, weather-beaten woman of late middle age. She held up her hands, palms out. "See, we don't chop off fingers. Nor do we keelhaul you, or toss you to the stingers, or anything savage like that! We don't really even haze you, or terrify you. I assure you my hair didn't go white with fear."

I nodded, and she rightly took my silence for consent.

"There's a lateen-rig due in tomorrow afternoon. Be here at sunset." With that she dismissed me, and delved back into her manifests.

So the following evening I duly presented myself and was taken by the quaymistress on board the *Ruby Piglet*, and down belowdecks to the boatmistress's poky cabin, lit by a single oil lantern; and by now I wasn't so much worried as to the nature of the initiation — which in this setting, it seemed to me, could hardly be spectacular or exotic — as that I might somehow be committing myself to sail the river on board *this* cramped tug. I'd had grander visions in mind, of two masts or three. A brig or a schooner.

When we knocked and entered, the boatmistress was wearing a fish mask, such as we see at the regatta once a year; nothing particularly daunting in that, even if the lantern light did lend more credence to the illusion of a woman with a piscine head, than whenever I'd seen such a mask by daylight. On a little table before her lay a much-thumbed version of *The Book of the River*, with a smaller chapbook

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

perched upon it. The boatmistress opened this smaller volume and flicked through it in a desultory way as though to refresh her memory; then she suddenly snapped out at me, giving me quite a start.

"Candidate rivergirl, say what the black current is!"

I supposed I gaped.

"Say!"

"It's, well, it's the current that stops us from crossing the river."

"What is its nature?"

"Black?" I suggested.

"Is it water? Is it oil? Is it thin, is it thick? Is it fast, is it slow? Is it living, is it dead?"

"Anyone who tries to cross it dies," said I boldly. "But first they go mad. They're swept away, they're dragged down, swallowed. ..."

The boatmistress read out of her chapbook. " 'It isn't water, and it isn't oil. It is more like blood, but not our red blood. It is more like a nerve, but not our nerves. It is more like a spinal column, but not our bony spines. It is all of these, and none.

" 'The body of the river lives its life from south to north, and the black current is its secret soul; but not like our souls, if we have souls. The black current is its mind; but not like our minds.

" 'For the river is a creature, and an entity. We are parasites upon her flesh, and the black current is the life-vein of the flesh. Enter it, and she drinks us, drowns us. But first she makes us mad.

" 'For all the water on this world is alive; it is all one whole, joined to itself. The river is the flexing tail of the dreaming ocean, ever rippling downstream, ever replacing itself.' "

Suddenly I was terrified, for to us in Pecawar ever since I had learned to lisp and point and ask questions, the river had simply been the river: a body of water, something to gaze up and down as boats sailed by (though not to swim in because of the stingers), a supply route, a signpost both ways to different cities, different landscapes.

Certainly we blessed the river as provider of irrigation (the stingers never surviving in still water), and of trade and mobility, and of rain and thus of our habitable zone itself — for the baking deserts commenced quite soon inland, even up south in jungled Ajelobo. But *The Book of the River* was no more, really, than a gazetteer and guidebook to everything that lay along the eastern shore: a manual for living in our world. Nowhere did it claim that the river was alive, and maybe malevolent; that it cared about us approximately as a dog cares for the fleas on its back — which seemed to be the implication here, with the added rider "let sleeping dogs lie."

The black current, insofar as I'd ever bothered about it, was simply an obstacle equivalent to whirlpools, though much worse; and what it was an obstacle to — namely, the western shore and whoever might live there — was uninteresting except to monkish oddities, since there was no way of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reaching it; and, what's more, whoever was over there, if there was anyone at all, was as uninterested in us as we were in them.

But if the river were alive ... Well, we all drank the water, didn't we? And human bodies are almost entirely made up of water. So we were built of river: heart and lungs, blood and brains.

" 'Women are of the river,' " I quoted; and the boatmistress snapped back at me:

"But she is not of us!"

Surely this was all some masquerade, precisely equivalent to hazing me or making me walk a plank, blindfolded, to tumble into the midst of stingers: something to bind me emotionally to the sorority of the river and the guild. So that perhaps I might remain loyal to river life and never choose to settle down with my imported husband? There were a few, though not very many, such shorehusbands living in Pecawar — though necessarily I had hardly ever even seen their wives, who remained afloat, returning only for holidays. But just then the fortunes of husbands were hardly very much on my mind.

Still, if this was all just an emotional bonding thing, I was convinced! Though it was a warm evening, particularly in the stuffy cabin, I shivered.

"Yaleen," the boatmistress said to me. "If something isn't to notice that you're foreign to it, then it must think that you're part of itself. That's how a parasite survives in the flesh of its host. Every New Year's Eve, from Tambimatu in the south ..." She paused.

"Where the river rises, beyond Ajelobo."

"The river doesn't rise, Yaleen. It doesn't come from a little spring or bubbling fountain."

"I know. It flows out from under the Far Precipices. So it must come through an underground channel from beyond."

"And it has the same girth at its Tambimatu source as it does at Umdala, where it spreads into the wild ocean. It emerges from under the Precipices the same way as a worm emerges from the earth, oozing solidly out."

"It has to come through a channel."

"But what is behind the Precipices? We don't know. They are unscalable. They rise into air too thin to ascend, in any case. Maybe they're ten leagues thick, or a hundred; or maybe they're as thin as a sheet of paper. Filter paper. They filter the salts from the sea as it squeezes through to become the river — drawn along by the muscle of the river. Any maybe if they filter salt water into fresh, the way our kidneys filter our blood, then deposits of salt are massed up and up within and behind the Precipices. Salt islands like iceberg slabs may calve vertically from time to time and crash back into the hidden ocean, to float away, break up and dissolve somewhere far away. Maybe in time you'll see far Tambimatu, where the jungles reek around the bases of the Precipices, and where

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the whole river oozes out at once into the open; then you can guess, as well as anyone. But, Yaleen ..."

"Ah, yes. Every New Year's Eve?"

"Right. At midnight when the world sleeps, a guild boat sets sail from Tambimatu across the river to the edge of the black current."

"To try to cross over between one year and the next — as though it mightn't be noticed? As though the river were midway between breathing one year in, and the next out?"

This fish mask shook in denial. "No, to bring back several bucketfuls of the blackness. Presumably, since it has always been this way, midnight at year's end is something like the metabolic low point of awareness of the river. Still, that journey out to midstream isn't without its risks to the volunteers so honored. Occasionally it happens that a crew-woman loses her sanity and throws herself overboard."

"You bring samples of the black current back to analyze?" I asked, perplexed.

The woman shook as though laughing silently; naturally I couldn't see her expression.

"What apothecary has the tools to analyze anything as alien as that? No, that isn't why. But *this* is." And from a shelf the boatmistress snatched a stoppered phial with wet darkness inside it. "Do you still wish to be a riverwoman?"

I hardly faltered, reasoning that the contents of that phial were surely simply ink-stained water. Or something similar.

"Yes, boatmistress. I do."

She unstoppered the phial and held it out to me.

"Then drink. Drink of the black current."

"And what will happen?" For maybe, after all, the liquid wasn't simple and innocuous. Maybe it was exactly what she said it was.

"Why, I'm still alive and of sound mind, aren't I, child?" murmured the quaymistress, at my shoulder.

"What will it do to me?"

"It will make you a riverwoman. Drink it quickly — all in one gulp."

Accepting the phial in my hand, I sniffed it — detecting hardly anything at all: a smell of ... dankness, perhaps — and I drank.

The sensation wasn't so much that of liquid flowing down my throat, as of swallowing a fat garden slug whole. Or a blob of jelly. One moment it was blocking my throat entirely; the next, and it was gone.

I held the phial up to the lantern light. The glass looked perfectly clean, with no dregs or droplets clinging inside.

Laying the empty phial down on the table before me, I awaited ... I knew not what. A sudden moonburst of light and understanding? A plunge into terror or ecstasy? Creeping clammy cold? Delirium? Menstrual cramps? I sat and waited; and my two witnesses — or assessors? — waited, too.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Finally the boatmistress nodded. "You're safe. The black current doesn't heed you. You don't offend it."

"What if I had?"

"Then you would have run up on deck, leaped over the side, and done your best to swim oblivious of stingers all the way to the current to join it. In other words, you would be dead."

"I've never heard of anyone doing such a thing."

"It doesn't happen to female applicants very often. Once in a thousand times, if that. And then we have to put it about that they signed on and sailed away without telling friends or family, and had an accident, or else that they stowed away and jumped the boat in a distant port."

"So I wasn't very worried," put in the quaymistress mildly.

I laughed nervously. "You said 'female applicants,' as though there could be such a thing as a *male* applicant!"

"Poor choice of words. Men may sail only once in their lives, with their wife-to-be; thus our genes are mixed."

I knew this, of course; it was laid down in the preface to *The Book of the River*. "But what if they *do* sail twice? Or try to?"

"Ah, there we have it. The black current calls them, and drowns them. The river is a jealous female entity, I suppose. She notices male pheromones adrift upon her. Once, she permits a man to sail, so that we may thrive. Twice, and she kills."

"I thought," said I, "that she simply ignored us?"

The fish mask dipped, as if in prayer. "Stranger are the ways of the river. But one thing's for sure: if you're a woman who's really a man, she'll cull you out."

"A woman who's really a man?"

"You know! Well, you're young yet, so perhaps you don't. ..."

I was sure (or at least halfway sure) that all this rigmarole was simply guild lore that had bloomed in the misty dark age after our arrival on this world, as a way of authenticating social patterns that had proved so stable and self-perpetuating: with women being the travelers and traders, with men marrying into their woman's household. Matrilineal descent, and so on and so forth. It was really all gloss on the privileges of the guild; and I reminded myself that any man who was so inclined, and sufficiently energetic, could walk all the way back to his hometown away from a wife he had grown to hate — or anyone else, for that matter. But obviously out of self-interest in the status quo, no boat would ease his passage.

The boatmistress lifted her mask; she was a sharp-faced freckled redhead, perhaps forty years old.

"There, that's all over," she said. "Not a word, mind. Now you can forget about it." She reached for a flask from the shelf containing a different kind of liquid — ginger spirit — and brought down three glasses, too. "So, welcome to the river and the guild, ap-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

prentice boatwoman." She poured. "Here's to faraway places, and unfamiliar shores."

The spirit was strong, and rushed to my inexperienced head.

"The most unfamiliar shore," I heard myself saying presently, "is just a league and a half away, right over there." Nudging the glass westward.

The boatmistress looked angry, and I hastened to add, "I mention it only on account of my twin brother. He wants to watch from Verrino."

"Verrino, eh? That's a long walk, for a young fellow." In the boatmistress's voice I caught a hint of vindictiveness, as though Verrino were some bastion of rebellion against the rightful way, the way of the river. If Capsi wished to get to Verrino, he would have to hike the fifty leagues; unless by some wild chance a husband-hunting girl from Verrino decided to visit us in Pecawar, fell madly in love with young Capsi, and carried him back home with her to wed. I didn't think that Capsi quite qualified yet as a noteworthy catch. Maybe in another couple of years he would. But equally, why should some girl marry him just to provide him with an easy journey downstream to the watchful fraternity of his?

"When do I join a boat?" I asked, in a more practical vein. Wishing, a moment later, that I hadn't asked — since I had no particular wish to bunk down on the *Ruby Piglet* (named, perhaps, in sardonic honor of its redheaded boatmistress?). But I needn't have worried.

Said the quaymistress, "There's a brig due in, day after tomorrow, with two empty berths; bound for Gangee, carrying grain. They heliographed ahead. Then they're running back all the way down to Umdala. Far enough for you, first-timer?"

I got home at nine o'clock, quite tipsy, and went up to Capsi's room; he was in, playing around with his latest reconstruction of the original spyglass, adding an extra lens or something. For all the good that would do. Perhaps my face was flushed: Capsi gave me much more than a second glance.

"I've joined the guild," said I proudly.

"Which guild?" he asked with mock innocence, as though there were any other guild for me.

"I'm sailing out. Thursday. Bound for Gangee, then Umdala. On the brig the *Sally Argent*." As though the name of the brig would mean anything to him. He hadn't spent years hanging about the quayside, snifffing around the ropes and bollards, and gettting in the way of men gangers unloading.

"Well, Sis, if you're going to Gangee, you'll be back here in about three weeks."

I advanced on him. "That's the last time you're going to call me Sis! I'm older than you, anyway."

"By two minutes. Fancy some rough and tumble, eh?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I halted. "Not especially."

"Some sublimated eroticism? Grope and squeeze?"

"How dare you."

"Well, what do they get up to when you join the guild? Strip you naked and prod you with a windless handle? Splice your main brace, whatever that means?"

"What makes you think they get up to anything? Well, they don't. So there."

"And pigs can fly." Had he slunk down to the quayside, and spied on me? Or had he just happened to notice that the *Ruby Piglet* was in town? Or neither — since it's often said that twins are empathetic? Well, there was precious little empathy going on right now! At first I couldn't understand it.

He pointed his spyglass at me. "Seriously, Sis, you need a tumble. You'll probably have to learn to fight with knives, if you're going on a boat."

"Oh, I see. I *see*. You're bloody jealous — because after I've been to Gangee and back, in another week or two I'll be sailing smoothly into Verrino, while you're still stuck here burning your eyes out staring at sweet all. Don't worry, Capsi: next time I'm home, from Umdala in six months or so, I'll tell you what your darling Verrino's all about."

His lips whitened. "Don't *you* worry. I'll be there by then."

"In that case" — and I peeled off one shoe, then the other — "you'll be needing these, and more!"

The first shoe missed him, bouncing off the wall where he had his pen-and-ink panorama of nowhere-land, the opposite shore, tacked up. But the second crashed into his spyglass, spinning it from his hand, with a subsequent tinkle of glass. Curiously, he disregarded its fate. At first, anyway; what happened after, I don't know, for I was already fleeing from the room. No, I wasn't fleeing. I was withdrawing in haughty dudgeon.

During my hastily organized going-away party the following evening, Capsi hardly spoke to me at all. Then, when I was on the point of leaving the house the morning after, with my duffle bag over my shoulder — which wasn't too traumatic a parting, from Mother and Father's point of view, since the run to Gangee and back was short — he winked at me, and whispered, "See you in Verrino."

"I'm sailing upstream first," I reminded him. "See you back here in three weeks."

"Don't you be too sure of that, Sis." And he dealt me a playful punch on the shoulder.

Learning the ropes on the *Sally Argent* was no less — and no more — strenuous, muscle-forming, et cetera, than I'd expected; and of course there were no knife fights among the crew, or any other such garbage. Being a riverwoman was just work, with free time sandwiched in between.

The spring winds were blowing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

leisurely downstream, so our course — allowing for the long, slow curves of the river one way, then the other — was basically west of south for a stretch away from shore till we were just over a third of a league out, then east of south back inshore again; repeat ad infinitum. Downstream river traffic at this season kept to a narrower sailing corridor nearer midstream, though always shunning by at least a sixth of a league the vicinity of the black current.

The dusty complexion of the country did not change markedly till we were almost at Gangee itself; then, quite suddenly, green hills bunched up, and foliage proliferated, and the semi-arid land disappeared — not to be seen again should we sail on as far as Ajelobo. For the Pecawar section marks the closest approach to civilization of the eastern deserts that parallel the whole course of the river from tropics to cooler north, generally at from ten to fifteen leagues' distance.

What is beyond the eastern deserts, farther to the east? There's no way of knowing. Some expeditions have gone into the deep desert in the past. One or two disappeared; one or two returned with the hard-won but unexciting news that the desert just went on and on.

Gangee, anyway, is on the very edge of the southern tropics, and is rather a fly-blown town, of sandstone buildings and rank weeds. It has neither the scoured dry neatness of Pecawar — with its shady arcades and secluded retreats of courtyards and fountains — nor the luxuriant bloom-bright tangle of cities farther south. It's neither one nor the other; so it's weedy rather than lush, and stony without bothering to beautify. Still, I visited the bazaar, and the rather clammy river-aquarium with all its exotic southern species — frills and teeth and blobs of paint — next to its collection of dourer northern specimens.

Then it was time to sail back down midchannel to Pecawar again.

The *Sally Argent* carried a complement of twenty, with one berth still empty; and on the whole my riversisters treated this apprentice in a brisk and friendly way. The boatswain, Zolanda, was a bit of a sod at times, usually in the mornings, as though she always woke with a headache (and perhaps she did); but my special friend was a rigger, Hali, a dumpy but energetic twenty-year-old with curly black hair and milky opal eyes: depending upon the light these either looked enchanting, or else slightly diseased with incipient cataracts.

The voyage downstream was straighter sailing than all the tacking upstream had been, and swifter with the tail wind. And less than a third of a league to port flowed the black current — which was the closest I had ever seen it, though it wasn't close enough for it to seem anything other than a thin strip of crepe ribbon laid along the entire midriff of the water. Actually,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the current was about a hundred spans wide.

Remarkably, now that I thought of it — for it wasn't something that one generally wondered about in Pecawar, with only one sample of barren shore opposite — there was no river traffic at all discernible across the water to the west, not even the smallest inshore fishing craft, so far as I could see. What's more, there seemed to be no villages at all on that other bank — let alone towns — yet the land was obviously inhabited, judging by the occasional wisp of smoke and, once, a tower on a hilltop way inland. Didn't they know what boats were, over there? Or that there were tasty fish in the river? (And who *were* "they," anyway?)

I was relaxing on deck, soaking up the spring sunshine with Hali during a slack time two days out of Gangee; and staring vaguely at the black current — which was so much a natural part of the river that it was hard to remember that it meant: *madness* and *death* — when the events of my secret initiation popped back into my mind, prompting a question that I hoped was discreetly phrased, so that it didn't violate my oath on *The Book*.

"Did you ever eat a black slug, Hali, before you joined the guild?" I asked quite lazily and casually.

And no sooner had I asked the question than I felt as sick as though I had indeed just crammed a garden slug, fresh from a bed of lettuce, into my mouth and were trying to swallow the slimy thing. I had to scramble up, rush to the rail, and vomit over the side.

Hali was behind me, steadying my shoulders. "All of us," she whispered, "ask the question once. I was wondering when you would, Yaleen. You see, we are of the river now; and we obey its rules — we break them at our peril."

The convulsions in my guts were easing.

"Riversick?" asked a familiarly abrasive voice. It was Zolanda, of course. "What, on this titchy little swell?"

She stared at me coolly, as I wiped my mouth; and I realized that she was offering me an excuse — because she must have known.

"I'm all right," I mumbled.

"Too much basking in the sun, that's your trouble. Get some work done." And she set me a whole heap of tasks.

Of course my vomiting was probably all psychological. To violate an oath, or try to circumvent one — particularly one taken on *The Book of the River*, which is our whole life, and all there is for us — is a pretty slimy thing; and essentially in such situations one punishes oneself, and sharply, too. So that night in my bunk, as we rode at anchor, I experienced an awful dream in which the black current reared up high out of the river like a serpent, developed a gaping mouth, full of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

void, and descended on me blindly.

I woke up with a cry, convinced that I'd been about to die. Soon a scantily clad Hali was comforting me; and presently she was doing so a little too intimately for my taste — or for my depths of inexperience — so that I cooled off from her somewhat for a few days, though we still remained friends. And the dream did not recur; because it didn't need to. I worked at being a good boatwoman.

And so back to Pecawar, to pick up a load of spices.

And home for one night. I even invited Hali home, reasoning that if she liked me, she might like my twin brother, too.

And Capsi had gone. Quit the nest. Trekked off northward, leaving his panorama of the farther shore and his homemade spyglass behind as though they were but childish toys.

I had to spend some time consoling and reassuring Mother and Father — not so much because Capsi had absconded (a man eventually ought to leave home), nor even because of the unwed manner of his departure, as because of the double desertion within such a short span of time. True, *I* would be returning home, but the voyage down the Umdala and back was a matter of months, not weeks. And who knew whether I would be returning on the *Sally Argent* at all? Or if I did stay with the boat, whether it would be sailing as far upriver as Pecawar the next time?

I told Father that I would try to look out for Capsi in Verrino, though this was a fairly vain undertaking, since we would be sailing into and out of Verrino before Capsi could possibly have reached the town on foot. I was careful not to *promise* to find him, even on the return trip.

So the overnight stay was a rather muted affair, even though Hali did her best to sparkle. I was only too glad to say good-bye the next morning.

You can spot Verrino from a long way upriver on account of its Spire, the natural rocky column rising from a particularly steep hill behind the town. On top of the Spire, up hundreds of steps with only a guide rope to stop you falling off, was where the little band of observers lived in presumably spartan circumstances, staring across at the farther shore through telescopes till their eyes grew dim. From the town itself one couldn't see anything of their activities, and the hundreds of steep steps were quite a disincentive to further investigation. I did climb as far as the base of the Spire itself, then gave up, feeling obscurely that I had done my duty. In any case it was quite impossible that Capsi could be up there yet.

So I turned my attention instead to exploring the town proper: a pleasant, bustling, twisty, up-and-down place, with sudden arbors and piazzas, wooden footbridges hung with clemato and cisca-vine crossing over alleys,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which in turn tunneled through rock or under buildings, themselves to emerge unexpectedly at rooftop height: rooftops crammed with terra-cotta urns of fuchsias. After the flatness of Pecawar, I adored Verrino, though the place made my calves and ankles ache. The people scampered everywhere, chattering like monkeys, many of the men laden with baskets balanced on their heads, the further to defy gravity — though no one that I saw ever went so far as to shin down vines as a shortcut from one level to the next.

Yet scamper about they might, it certainly wasn't fast enough for Boatmistress Karil, who by the second day was grumbling about demurrage charges, and by the third was inveighing that we would have to spend the whole damn week here, the way things were going.

What was holding us up was a large consignment of spectacle lenses from the glassworks and grindery inland — another reason, by the by, in addition to the towering vantage point of the Spire, why the observers congregated above Verrino — and since lenses are such a costly item compared with their size, and since they were bound all the way to Umdala, Karil was loath to sail off and leave the freighting to a subsequent boat, thus losing a handsome percentage.

So we the crew were free to roam — one or two to go looking, speculatively, for possible husbands; those older women such as Zolanda, who were already married with a husband ensconced in some far port, to go hunting discreetly for a spot of carnal appeasement and amorous intrigue with married men; and some of the younger women with whoever took their fancy.

Naturally, married men whose wives were absent were bound to be husbands of other riverwomen; and you might have thought it was rather poor form for one riverwoman to have fun with another riversister's man while she was away. But actually this was something of a game, and generally winked at; and when I came to think of it, it made sense. Some women might be away for months, even as long as a year, and during this time obviously they nursed desires — as did their spouses back home. Better, much better, that there should be a kind of covert swap arrangement, all within the embrace of the guild, even if nobody admitted it publicly.

But besides these stranded husbands, there were always a number of adventurous and available young men — who could hardly look to the girls of their own town to marry; and this firm custom cast a risky pall over seducing them, or even flirting too boisterously.

So the next secret of the guild that I learned — from Hali, who else? — was how to avoid getting pregnant in foreign ports, a skill without which these shore-leave adventures could have proved bothersome. A drug, which in river argot was simply called

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Safe" — thus keeping it our own preserve, should shore ears be wagging — could be extracted by boiling up the entrails of the barbel-fish.

Not that it was any crime to become pregnant, though giving the exertions of our work this could end up by "beaching" a riversister for quite a while; and you would sometimes see girl children on passing boats, though generally all kids were left at home in the husband's care.

Girl children: that was the real problem. Boy children could no more sail the river more than once than could youths or grown men — which would mean that boys born or wombed on the river would, when they grew up, have to walk all the way to a future wife's town, should she care to put up with this inconvenience for the sake of love; and sometimes the river might even take exception to a male fetus well before its term, making the mother miscarry; and who was to know whether a fetus was male or female? So a riverwoman contemplating pregnancy generally arranged this with some care, and beached herself for the full term. And many riverwomen played it Safe permanently; and would only consider adopting a family. And many never bothered marrying at all.

So, on what was to be our penultimate evening in Verrino, Hali winked at me. "Let's try the night life out," she said, and handed me a little blue phial of fish juice.

I acepted it laughingly, only partly out of bravado.

"Why not?" I winked back, and drank it down.

A couple of hours later we were in a busy wine arbor lit by fairy candles, bantering with a pair of slim, handsome brothers with coppery skin, lambent eyes, and pert turned-up noses — with the banter gradually becoming more serious, though, of course destined to remain a game; whatever happened, a game. I was a little tipsy, and my partner, with whom I danced a few turns, said that he was called Hasso — and maybe he really was called that. I kissed him, and when I next paid attention, Hali had vanished from the arbor along with her new friend.

Hasso murmured sweetly, "I know somewhere."

"I know lots of places," said I, rather wickedly. "Pecawar, Gangee ..."

But he took my repartee in good part; as indeed he would, since he was anxious to please me.

And not so many hours later we were at that somewhere, the two of us — it was an attic room, window choked with night-scented clemato, reached by a long thin bridge — and I was discovering that I didn't know everything, though I was quick to learn.

Nor did he know everything; though the gaps in his knowledge were other than mine.

"Must be marvelous, river travel,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he nuzzled in my ear. Or something to that effect; I was on the point of swinging round to approach him by another route.

"Must see all sorts of things on the far bank, while sailing." He was leaving out the personal pronouns, perhaps without realizing he was doing so. As I surmised presently, thus he drew back from an actual spoken breach of faith.

"Cities and such—"

At this stage I wasn't offended; I simply thought that since the aura of the river was about me, this was turning him on as much as my young charms.

"Ah, beyond the black current—"

I thought, capriciously, of telling him what that current *tasted* like, but I had no particular desire to test whether I would vomit as readily on shore as I had on the boat. Besides, I already had my mouth full, being otherwise occupied.

He relaxed, with a groan.

"Tell me *something* that's seen over there, eh? Something wild and wonderful. Anything at all."

I broke off abruptly, squirmed aside and found my clothes. I *knew* now. It was no coincidence that Hali and I had fallen in with these two personable brothers at the wine arbor. They'd been looking for such as us. Or rather, for such as me: someone new and naive, freshly filled with all the wonders of the river and its sights, and probably boastful. No doubt the other brother was simply keeping the more experienced Hali suitably occupied, while Hasso set out to pump me on behalf of the observers up there on the Spire. ...

I didn't cry or make a fuss or accuse him, consoling myself with the thought that *I* had pumped him. Dry.

"Have to get back," I lied. "I'm on night watch."

Why any boatmistress should order night watch kept in a harbor, I had no idea; but it was the first thing I thought of.

Hasso propped himself on his elbow, grinning. "Are you *sure* you have to get back to your ship, little Yaleen?"

"My *boat*," I corrected him hotly. "Shorelubber!"

And in another moment I fled past the veils of clemato, whose smell seemed cloying now, and over the high, slim wooden bridge, alone.

I'd wondered whether or not to tell Hali of my suspicions. However, it was the wee hours before she returned on board, and by then it had occured to me that she might imagine I was rationalizing some sort of sexual disaster; which I was not, by any means. So in the end I pretended to be asleep, and said nothing at all.

And early in the morning the padded boxes of spectacle lenses arrived. Almost immediately after we cast off and set sail downstream, for all points north to farthest Umdala.

I didn't return to up-and-down

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Verrino for a whole twelve months, by which time I was no longer just an apprentice but newly held my guild ticket; nor was I on the *Sally Argent* anymore.

In the first year or two young riverwomen are encouraged to work a variety of craft, and I was no exception. Besides, I think that subconsciously I chose to hop boat in the way I did so as to delay my return to Verrino (and Pecawar) for quite a while. What I told myself was that I ought to see as much of downriver as I could, while I was still freshly impressionable.

So I sailed with that first boat of mine all the way down to cool, misty Umdala, calling en route at Sarjoy, Aladalia, Port Firsthome, Melonby, and Firelight. At Umdala I'd skiffed across the marshes, and I'd wandered the geometrical streets of blockhouses with their steeply pitched roofs, like rows of wedges set to cut whatever weight of snow might settle from the sky in deep winter. And I'd seen the enormous widening of the river, where fresh water became salt, prelude to the angry ocean — with the black current ribboning out and out. And I had wondered whether Umdala was built as it was entirely to defeat white winters, or whether there might not have been another hidden thought in the ancient builders' minds — for this was an outpost city: outpost, not against human enemies, but against what the river became as it broadened out, the unnavigable dire sea.

I returned on the *Sally Argent*, still with Hali, as far upstream as the soft green grazing hills of Port Firsthome, where I wondered at the time-worn Obelisk of the Ship — a "ship," as all but shorelubbers know, being something quite distinct from a boat, which plies water and not the star-void.

At Port Firsthome I hopped off, with a good endorsement on my papers from Boatmistress Karil, and signed on the three-mast schooner *Speedy Snail*, a lumbering heavy-duty boat that cruised only from Aladalia to Firelight and back; and through the summer and autumn months I stayed with her till I'd won my ticket. Then, as the winds blowing from the north became quite chilly, it was good-bye to the *Speedy Snail* and hello to the caravel *Abracadabra* and local hauls in the Aladalia region, which distanced me from the worst excesses of deep winter. Not that I was scared of catching cold! Still, I did hail from Pecawar, where the desert keeps us dry and where the winter months bring only a few ground frosts before dawn. Somehow I didn't yet feel like sailing farther south, up Verrino way.

So for a while artistic Aladalia was my home, with its weavers and jewelers and potters and its orchestra, almost as much as the *Abracadabra* herself; and I even got involved in something of a relationship (casual but warm: I needed to keep warm) with one Tam; and because this was a sweet experience I think I'll say less about it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than about my first time, with Hasso. Just in case I find any little flaws in this affair, too? No. It remained quite innocent of any reference to what went on or didn't go on over the water.

But came the spring, and a letter from my mother, and a concerned note from my father; so from the caravel I hopped to the brig *Blue Sunlight* bound for Sarjoy and Verrino; and who should be waiting on the quayside as the *Blue Sunlight* tied up at its destination, but Capsi.

I waved and waved, and as soon as I was free of my duties I rushed ashore and hugged him.

"How did you *know?*"

He laughed delightedly. "Well, I knew you'd have to pass this way sometime. After all, there aren't two rivers! I simply paid the quaymistress a little retainer to keep an eye on the Guild Register for me."

"You're lucky, then. I only just joined *Blue Sunlight* in Aladalia."

"Lucky, indeed! Fine thing to say about your own guild, Sis. Ooops, apologies, Yaleen. But surely you mean "efficient"? One boat got here ahead of you, with the latest crew list ex-Aladalia. And before *Blue Sunlight* it was *Abracadabra;* and before that—"

"You seem quite efficient, too. Obviously you know everything about me." (But he didn't know *all,* I added inwardly. I was a girl when last we met; but now I was a woman, and a riverwoman, too.)

Arm in arm we strolled up a steep cobbled street to the nearest wine arbor, to toast our reencounter.

"So how's it with you?" I asked him, as we sat on a bench beneath familiar garlands of clemato.

"Oh, I sits up the Spire, and I stares," said he jocularly.

"Seen anything amusing?"

His voice quietened. "There's a little town about two leagues over there. Just a little one, but we have Big Eye trained on it. That's our newest telescope, with lenses right at the limits of the grinders' art. You must come up and visit me at work."

"Must I?"

"You'd be interested — who wouldn't be?"

"Maybe I wouldn't. I've seen Aladalia and Port Firsthome and Umdala. Why should I squint at a nameless *little* town? I bet what you see's all wavery and blurred — and so far away."

"It isn't as blurred as you'd think. We're high up."

"So what do you see?"

"People."

"Surprise, surprise. I expected dragons."

"Very tiny people, of course."

"What, dwarfs?"

"Cut down the sarcasm, Sis. This is important."

"More important than our first meeting in a year?"

With perceptible effort he untensed, and chuckled. " 'Course not. Let's drown that year, eh?" And he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drained his glass. "I know a marvelous little spot to eat. Afterward. When we need something to soak it all up. Fancy some spiced sweet-rice and kebabs?"

And he punched me softly on the shoulder. Somehow, though, that particular patch of flesh seemed sore, from way, way back.

After his first overanxious little outburst, which had been like a premature ejaculation of something long pent up, Capsi played me carefully; I'll give him all credit for that. He kept off the subject and showed me the town, which I already knew, but hardly as well as he knew it. I'd signed off the *Blue Sunlight* and taken a small rooftop room for a while, after writing ahead to Mother and Father to announce that I'd be arriving soonish, a letter that I left with the quaymistress to forward by the next upriver boat.

Credit, yes ... though there was genuine happiness to see me, too, and brotherly affection; which rather confused the matter for me emotionally; otherwise I might never have fallen for his suggestions. But my actions seemed correct and brave at the time, and in defense of my own sex, even.

Indeed, Capsi managed to keep off the topic of his own obsession so well that after a couple of days I relented, and asked him, "Well, what about the tiny people over there?"

"Tiny, because they're at the range of Big Eye's powers of resolution."

"Oh, I *know* that."

He frowned. "But on a clear day, when the atmosphere's still, you can tell the men from the women. They're dressed differently: the women all wear black."

"How can you tell they're women?"

"Babies. Sometimes they take babies with them, into the fields."

"Could as easily be the menfolk."

"*Feeding* a baby? That's how it looked to our keenest-eyed watcher"; and he hesitated before naming him: "Hasso."

"Ah," said I; I was *almost* prepared for this.

"He sends you his affectionate apologies, Yaleen."

I flushed; did my brother know all about that first night? I was angry, ready to walk away; but instead I shrugged, and said, "It seems to me that you people base a whole lot of inference on one man's voyeuring of something leagues away!"

He waved his hand dismissively. "Maybe, maybe not. The people over there don't go anywhere near the river. They don't sail so much as a plank on it. They don't net any fish. They don't even have a single shack that we know of, anywhere near the water. Why?"

"Because ... only women can sail the river—"

"And no women is allowed within a league of it. As I said, it's only a little town — so where are their cities, if they have them? But presumably they do. They're inland, as far away into the habitable zone as they can get."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Assuming there are deserts beyond. Same as this side."

"Fair assumption."

"So they don't like the river; that was always obvious. What else is new?"

"What else is new, Yaleen, is that they *burn* women over there."

"... What?"

"About six months ago, when Big Eye was first commissioned—"

"Only boats are commissioned, brother dear."

"Well, whatever word. Through Big Eye we saw a crowd gather outside the town. Then a little cart was pulled through the crowd, to what looked like a pile of wood. One of the tiny black figures — we couldn't be sure they were women then — was dragged off the cart ... and soon the flames crackled and the smoke curled up."

"Is this true?"

"I swear on *The Book* it is."

"But why should they do anything so cruel?"

"Because they hate and fear the river. And woman is of the river. And fire is the foe of water."

I gripped Capsi's wrist. "Water," I said, "*quenches* fire."

And this was the beginning of my undoing. Well, perhaps not of *my* undoing personally, but certainly the start of a fateful sequence of events for my brave if wayward brother.

The very next day I was toiling up that damned never-ending stone staircase. Capsi climbed behind me; thus, at least I could set the pace.

The stairs wound round the Spire at least thrice before we entered, finally, an upward tunnel with subsidiary stairways and chambers leading off it, cut in the naked rock; and thus arrived at last back in the open air up on the top stone platform. This was wider than I'd expected from down below: about seventy spans across, with a safety rail around the exposed parts of the rim. On the eastern side a stone wall acted as a windbreak — not that the wind would blow from the east for more than thirty days in the whole year (unless high wind was different than river wind), but up on this exposed eminence a windbreak of any kind was probably better than none. Set on the western edge of the platform, blocking my immediate view of the far shore, was a low observatory building of brick, roofed in slate.

The platform was an austere, breezy place, strangely blank and untenanted — yet at the same time worn smooth by habitation.

"Where is everyone? Where do you live?"

Capsi jerked his thumb below. "Underneath in the rock. There are lots of rooms."

How weird and contrary to my expectations that Capsi, so high up in the air, should be leading what amounted to a troglodytic life!

High, yes: far higher than any mast I had ever shinned up. Walking over to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the guardrail, I stared downriver, away and away in the direction of Sarjoy — though, even so, Sarjoy itself must have been quite some distance beyond the horizon. I picked out familiar landmarks on the eastern shore, and at least half a dozen boats that might almost have been motionless (but weren't); and I missed something. My whole body missed it, so that I gripped the rail for balance. It was movement that was absent: the slight rocking to and fro that I'd known any other time I had been up a height, upon the river, the gentle tilt back and forth of a masthead.

Yet the clouds above looked to be as high in the sky as ever; and the river, strangely, seemed wider rather than narrower now that I was seeing its span entire from bank to bank, the way a bird sees it. The river — with the band of the black current dividing it midway like the loading line along a beached hull. ...

I scanned the far shore for Capsi's reputed town, somewhere inland amidst the rolling, wooded hills and little valleys, but couldn't pick it out unaided — nor any other landmarks but those of nature. Highways? No, I could see none ... unless ... was that one, far far off, winding inland?

And directly below me was bustling, hither and thither, Verrino: half a league of activity and variety, with its orchards and vineyards beyond, and somewhere farther in the bushy hills behind, the sand pits and glassworks.

"What a sad life up here, Capsi!"

"Sad? What's that got to do with it? Come on, I'll show you Big Eye." He pulled me away from the railing and all its grand vistas, toward the brick building; and it seemed to me that none of the sights were quite real to him unless he spied at them from out of the dark indoors, through a glass like a voyeur.

A wooden door, studded with rusty iron bolts: he pushed it open, and I was prepared to find myself in gloom reminiscent of the river-aquarium in Gangee.

But no: it was light and airy. A whole strip of exposed scenery cut a welcome swath several spans high through the whole length of the westerly wall; for the midriff of this wall was all hinged windows, with most of the panes hoisted up and out to form a canopy, ventilating the observatory and sheltering the instruments from rain, unless a shower was scudding from due west.

Several ancient telescopes were retired to corners, but three principal instruments poked their barrels through different windows, two of these in use — the westward gazers seated on wooden chairs with straight backs and cushions as a concession to comfort. There was no doubt at all which of the instruments was Big Eye: it was fully nine spans long, and my arms would hardly have gone around the tube.

The northern wall was shelved, with what I took to be logbooks filed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on it, and sketching material; while the whole south wall was taken up by a huge panorama that quite dwarfed the one Capsi had made for his bedroom wall back home. Quite what use the panorama was, with the reality in plain view, I thought I would forbear to ask — though doubtless it was easier to examine details (such as individual trees?) upon that great scroll of paper, and measure distances from place to place. (And doubtless, too, trees grew ... so the panorama must always be inaccurate.)

The man seated at the smaller instrument glanced round. Dressed in worn brown trousers and a tight jerkin, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up for business, he was white-haired with a wrinkled, impish face. He simply registered our presence, nodded, then got back to his observations — which struck me as something of a waste of time, since surely his aged eyes were feebler than the young man's next to him, and the telescope he was using was less powerful, too.

The young man next to him ... wearing jauntier attire: boots, flared trousers tucked in, and an unforgettable shirt, striped scarlet and black.

"Hasso," said Capsi; and as though the watcher at Big Eye had awaited this signal, he looked round and sprang up. Hasso was just as handsome as I remembered.

"See all sorts of things on the far bank," he remarked merrily and unselfconsciously. "Welcome back, Yaleen."

"And sometimes," said I, "you have to go fishing for hints. How's your brother?"

"Oh, he's a townsman at heart. Never comes up here. We just go round together ... on occasion."

"O.K., O.K., I don't mind." (But I did mind, quite a bit.) "That's so much water down the river."

Fortunately he did not attempt anything as crass as to advance and peck me on the cheek; he simply motioned me politely to his chair, and the vacant eyepiece of Big Eye. I sat down, and shut one eye to stare.

The telescope was trained on the little town — no more than a large village, really, nestling in the gradients of the land; and for me the weirdest thing of all in looking upon it was that the place was nameless. Nowhere in *The Book of the River* was its name inscribed; which meant that it did not exist — and yet it did.

Compared with Verrino, or even the smallest settlement on our shore, even to my unpracticed eye it looked impoverished and primitive. Straw thatch? Apparently. Walls of dried mud? Some, perhaps, of wood. There was nothing of architecture or adornment about the settlement, except for one central building of stone, with an onion dome at one end. I felt not so much that I was gazing across a few leagues of space, as back hundreds or even thousands of years through time. Perhaps Capsi was right in his ob-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

session, after all, and here was a more curious sight than any to be seen from Ajelobo to Umdala. ... I found myself itchy to peel away the hills, step up the power of the telescope, and discover what *did* lie farther to the west; yet this wasn't a particularly pleasant sort of itch, not the kind that it's a pleasure to scratch and satisfy.

"Do you see a black patch, on the green outside the town?" Hasso whispered in my ear, as though the folk I was spying upon might hear him if he spoke too loudly. "That's where they burned her. Alive. In flames."

I broke off my viewing, not desiring this kind of covert closeness.

"How do you get all this stuff up here, and your food and water and everything?" I directed my question at Capsi, though he was hanging back as if he had arranged for Hasso to be here especially to please me; which it didn't. "Up all those wretched stairs?"

"We hoist heavy supplies. Winch 'em up in baskets."

"And how do you pay for them?"

"Oh, donations," he said vaguely. "And some of us work part time down in Verrino."

"How many of you are there?"

"About twenty. Some young, some old. Come and see — we've nothing to hide. It's that lot over there who are hiding. They're hiding from the river. And they make women wear black. And they burn them."

"But you're all *men* up here, aren't you?"

Hasso chuckled. "We aren't misogynists exactly. ..." ("As you surely noticed," he had the good grace not to add.) "I hope Capsi passed on my affectionate apologies?"

"He did. Verbatim. It seems to me that the men over there must be the kingpins, who decide what women do — and *you* aren't above using women, if it suits you! Could there perhaps be a certain element of envy in your activities up here?"

"There could be, but there isn't." It was the old imp who spoke up; so he must have been listening, instead of looking. "Sister Yaleen, knowledge is our goal; that's all. The knowledge of what on earth is going on over there, with the whole other half of our human community. They who share this world with us."

So he already knew my name. Which meant that they had all discussed my coming. I was as much a part of a plan now as ever I had been — in a more casual, extempore way — when Hasso lovingly deflowered me that evening a year ago.

"You feel ... threatened, perhaps?" said the old fellow gently. "Please don't. It's the women over there who are under threat. Your sisters, not you."

Yes. But the observers hadn't known of this threat till recently, when they had acquired Big Eye. And yet maybe they had guessed for a long time that the west bank was opposed to everything that our river society stood for. ...

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, that's Big Eye," said Capsi lightly. "Come on and we'll show you around, below."

"*You* can show me around, brother dear. I'm sure Hasso has lots more peeping to attend to."

Hasso pursed his lips; he seemed more amused than offended.

So Capsi proceeded to give me the guided tour of at least most of their aerie and citadel — carved into cell rooms, kitchen, refectory, storerooms and such — and culminating in the "map room," where was filed or displayed every iota of information, supposition, or hearsay that they had ever gleaned about the west bank all the way from Ajelobo to Umdala, a labor of goodness knows how many years. A hundred? Two hundred? More? I saw panoramas and sketches and even maps of the immediate hinterland, though the maps themselves must have been beset with flaws due to foreshortening, given the perspectives they were drawn from.

Such dusty patience. Such dedicated ... waiting. Capsi confessed to me offhandedly that he, and they, rather regretted that he had not brought his own pen-and-ink panorama of the shore opposite Pecawar with him from home. But when I offered to collect it from our house and drop it in at Verrino next time I was passing by, he didn't seem quite as glad of my offer as I should have expected. Perhaps he had already promised his colleagues something better?

Then, the tour at an end (if I had indeed seen everything, and the place was a bit of a maze), Capsi escorted me back down those ankle-aching stairs to real life and bustle, and a bottle of wine and spicy lamb couscous with minted yogurt.

If he had further schemes in mind for me, he didn't go into them. Though what they might be, I was hard put to imagine — so much so that I was almost on the point of asking him outright.

Two days later, in the afternoon, just after I'd come back to my little rooftop room after a visit to the quaymistress's office inquiring of a boat with an empty berth to carry me back to Pecawar in another week or so, Capsi burst in upon me, panting with exertion, his face flushed.

"They're at it again," he panted. "Crowd outside the town. Bonfire piled up. Come on!" Strangely, he seemed glad. Almost radiant.

I wondered briefly if this were a trick; but obviously something that happened six months ago can always repeat itself six months later. I raced with him.

It took us only about twenty minutes — with Capsi ducking up and down shortcuts that would have lost me — to snake through the town and out to the Spire, and spiral our way up till, almost heart-burst, we emerged onto the platform.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As soon as we entered the observatory, which was crowded, a path opened for me to Big Eye, where Hasso jumped out of his seat to make room. I was shaking and panting so much from the sprint that I let him steady my shoulders as I sat there.

I peered: at a tiny crowd on a greensward, half of the people robed in black; and an empty cart, and a bonfire burning. With a stake set in the center of the flames, and something fastened to the stake.

I watched a long while, till the crowd began to troop back toward the wretched village, dragging the cart along with them, leaving a smoking ruin behind.

Then I ran out, around to the guardrail. Sure enough, away to the west hung a tiny faint smudge.

I returned; the observers young and old all watched me expectantly.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked them.

Capsi answered quietly, "We want to send an observer over. To find out."

"Over there? But that's impossible. The black current's in the way. You haven't learned to fly, by any chance?"

"Our ancestors must have known how to fly," remarked the old imp, whose name I knew now as Yosef. "A lost skill, eh? Perhaps deliberately so. Still, I've had a few ideas on the subject. ..."

I quoted the preface to *The Book of the River* at him. " 'Man is of the shore, woman is of the water, only birds are of the sky. ...' "

He stared at me fixedly. "Yes, precisely. So there's no point in my entertaining such thoughts, is there, boatwoman? Or we would threaten the balance of the applecart. Something that no self-respecting guild would ever allow. ..."

"River society *works*," said I. "And nicely, too. Obviously things don't work very well over there."

"Oh, I wasn't suggesting that this particular applecart is in any danger of overturning. None whatever! I've ruled out any fancy, speculative notions of flying. It's a somewhat visible thing to attempt. Meanwhile, girls like you are burning over there. Twice now, in that one miserable little town."

What I'd seen had been far away, tiny and silent; yet just for a moment I felt an intuition of the fear, the awful fear, and the agony, and was nearly sick from it. Flames licking round my feet, crisping my skin to pig's crackling, then burning through to the bone, while I screamed and screamed. ...

"Somebody has to cross the river and report back," said Capsi. "You do see that, don't you?"

"Men can sail the river only once. Cross, and report back? That's twice. You aren't suggesting that *I* make the crossing? It's ridiculous: the current's in the way, in any case."

"No, Yaleen, I wasn't suggesting you. Obviously a man is safer over there than a woman. It's *I* who'll go. Just once. One way. And I'll report

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back by heliograph."

"But how could you get through the current? It's madness — and death. That isn't just some rumor that we women put around!"

"Oh, it's true, and no denying," said old Yosef. "The river has a mind of its own, and senses things, and reacts to them. Or rather, let's say that the black current acts this way. So it's a creature: a very long creature that lives in the river, anchored to the Precipice Mountains at one end like a tapeworm, floating all the way along it and spilling out into the sea at its other end. And it can smell what happens in the water. It can scent one man's odor and remember it, and distinguish it from half a million others; and it can put thoughts into his brain, of despair and death, if it smells him twice. Whereas women, it favors. No doubt because they pose no threat to it."

His speculations seemed dangerously close to some of the secrets of my initiation ceremony; though plainly the black current couldn't be a creature such as he envisaged — not if it was possible to scoop out parts of it and bottle these in phials. It had to be of a different nature, and much larger than their concept of it: larger than our whole country, and perhaps much more powerful, in its apparently quiescent, unrevealing way, than any of them supposed.

I said nothing at all to confirm or deny to what extent the guild might have reached the same conclusions — which of course had precious little to do with the business of everyday life.

"So," I simply said, "there's no way through. However crazy you are."

"Not through," replied Capsi. "Under."

"*Under?*"

Old Yosef stuck his oar in again. "Based on the reasonable presumption that the black current doesn't extend all the way to the bottom. Why should it, when it floats? There must be clear water beneath. Maybe the current is only a few spans thick."

"Ah, I *see*. And it's only a hundred spans wide. So Capsi is just going to hold his breath for five or ten minutes, plunge into water infested with stingers, and ... It's preposterous. Since when, Capsi, could you swim like a fish?"

"I've been practicing," he said defensively. "Down at the Verrino baths."

"And is that also where you've been practicing holding your breath, till you turn blue?"

"You misunderstand," said Yosef. "Come, and we'll show you how."

Down below, we entered a stone chamber with mullion windows cut in the rock wall facing east. I'd certainly not been admitted here two days before, during Capsi's guided tour.

A long wooden table was piled with curious gear: a large glass globe, a leather suit, boots with lead weights attached and flipperlike protuberances,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

various flexible tubes sewn out of riversnake skin, bladders, thick glass bottles, satchels — and unmistakably, a dismantled heliograph. ...

"That," announced Capsi proudly, "is my diving suit. Enough air can be bottled under pressure to let me breath in the glass helmet for nearly twenty minutes. The helmet and other glass parts are by a special commission from the grindery. The weights and the gear I'm carrying slung about me will counteract the buoyancy of all the air. And here" — he picked up what was plainly a lamp, though of curious design — "is my underwater light supply, if I have to dive deep and need light, fueled with magnesium."

"It'll explode."

'No, it won't," Yosef assured me. "Been tested."

"Then I float up, discard the bowl, and my head is protected from stingers by this leather cap and wire mask."

I turned to Yosef, who had obviously dreamed up all this apparatus. "You seem to have thought of everything — except for one little detail: what Capsi is going to *do* for the whole rest of his life over there."

My brother grinned at me wolfishly. "Explore, that's what. I'd say that there's quite enough *terra incognita* to occupy a lifetime. And I'll report back, of course. At intervals."

"So where do I come into all this?" As though I hadn't already guessed.

"You have access to boats, sister dear. You know the ropes and the routines. We only need a very small craft. Sufficient for me and one other helper, who'll surrender his once-in-a-lifetime chance on the river to assist."

"And I suppose that the brave volunteer is Hasso?"

Capsi nodded, unabashed.

"I'm not sure if I can handle even a cutter or a sloop on my own. ..." But I thought that I could. *Whether* I should was quite another matter.

"We were on the verge of appealing to your better nature," explained Yosef, in an old wise way. "But now — you have seen what you have seen."

Yes. The bonfire. The burning woman. The smoke rising up.

Unsure whether I was championing my sex, or betraying it, I, too, nodded.

After this, events achieved a momentum of their own. The very next midnight, starlit and clear, saw me — or rather failed to see me, since I had "borrowed" the little cutter discreetly, though with my heart in my mouth — rocking far out upon the river on dark water, within a stone's throw of the deeper darkness of the current.

Masked and helmeted in his preposterous fishbowl, and his suit hung with gear, Capsi was assisted over the side by Hasso. And my brother sank.

We didn't hang around; we were drifting closer to the current. I set sail, grabbed the tiller, and we fled back to the shore, where I let Hasso off somewhere upstream of the quay before

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sneaking the cutter back to its berth. Without being noticed. Though I expected at any moment that somebody would stroll up on deck for a breath of air, or reel back from a very late night on the town.

Returning to my room, I tried to sleep but couldn't. By earliest dawn I was toiling up the hundreds of steps of the Spire.

Almost all of the observers were up on the platform, spread out along the guardrail, keeping a silent vigil upon the western shore — with two men even watching the southerly stretch, though it seemed unlikely that Capsi could have forged upstream against the flow. With the exception of Big Eye, all of the telescopes, even the ancient ones, had been pressed into service — brought out into the open, mounted on swivel tripods; though no one was using these to scan just at the moment. One's ordinary field of view, including peripheral vision, was more likely to catch the tiny blink of reflected light when it came; if indeed it ever came. Hasso and Yosef were inside the observatory; so I stayed outdoors.

An hour went by — and meanwhile the sun rose behind us.

Then suddenly, when I was really beginning to fret, a man cried out and pointed — quite far to the north.

Other observers hastily swung telescopes about and clapped an eye to them; but even at that distance I could spell out the winks of the helio-mirror.

"S-A-F-E. *Safe*," I called out.

The rest of the brief message was: "*Tired. Must sleep, then move south.*" "Tired" was no doubt a considerable understatement.

No sun-signal was sent in acknowledgment, not merely because the sun was at our backs, but in case anyone on the opposite shore might see it, and be able to interpret. However, a smoky, billowing fire was lit briefly in a brazier; and after a couple of minutes, quenched.

Since it seemed ridiculous, after that, to keep returning to my room down in the town I accepted Yosef's offer of a little bedchamber in the Spire; and by midday I had stored some of my gear at the quaymistress's office and humped the bare essentials aloft, declining Hasso's assistence.

Yet once ensconced up top, I had nothing to do, and within a few hours I was feeling bored and restless.

And anxious? Where was the use of anxiety for someone I could never see again — except maybe briefly through Big Eye?

I ought to have been feeling intensely curious about what Capsi would report, as prearranged, at dawn the next day. Yet when it was a question of why women were being burned alive, "curiosity" hardly seemed the right description of my feelings; I ... dreaded to know the answer. And as to curiosity in general about the facts of life on the west bank, well of course I felt some superficial curiosity — but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

how much of it could Capsi satisfy effectively within the first few days? I was leaving. Soon. And I had no wish to sail away and yet remain in mental thrall to these observers forevermore, impelled to dash back constantly to hear the latest. If I acted in that style, why, Capsi would have made me a slave of his for life, on a chain as long as the river!

Selfish little Yaleen? No, not really. Only sensible, I'd have said. ...

Sensible? Hardly! I soon began fretting that by taking up temporary residence on the Spire I might have identified myself too visibly with the observer men, prompting some busybody in Verrino to ask the question: Why?

I realize now that I was in a very confused emotional state, about what I'd done and what Capsi had undertaken. I wished to flee, but had to stay — and vice versa! By six o'clock I found myself hesitating at the top of the stairs, craving a drink in town and ordinary chatter around me. I had to pull myself up sharply and retrace my steps to my room, because actually I was almost ready to keel over in exhaustion and tumble all the way down into town.

So back to my chamber I crept. Then, without my quite knowing how it happened, Hasso was standing by my bedside — where I lay fully dressed.

"No!" I cried, blinking at him.

And he chuckled, indicating the faint gray light beyond the mullion.

"Dawn's breaking, Yaleen."

"What?"

"I thought I'd best come and fetch you — just in case you slept right through. I'm sure you'd have never forgiven me for *that*."

When the light of the heliograph blinked out, half an hour later, it came from almost opposite Verrino. But we could be fairly sure that no else would see it but us. It was very low, and we were high; and besides, who else would be looking out for a signal light from that direction?

Today's message was longer.

"Went inland. Avoided contact. Hid near town. All females wear black, confirmed. Town is shabby, poor, dirt-agric. Plus pigs, chickens, goats. Mining activity southside hills, thus reason for location. Male and female workers. Overheard passersby on track. Same language, few strange words, accent thick but imitable. Diving suit worked like a dream. Black current fifteen spans deep approx. Same time tomorrow. End."

So there was nothing whatever to do till then. Unless I wished to pore over panoramas and grub through records of past observations, and hearsay from Ajelobo to Umdala; which I did not.

I could just as easily have stayed in town, and climbed up every day before dawn!

Perhaps. Perhaps that mightn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have been quite so easy in poor light. ...

After a breakfast of black bread, raw fish, and pickles in the refectory, I decided that I should certainly spend the day in town, and slipped quietly away.

Not quietly enough, however. Hasso caught up with me halfway down the spiraling steps.

"Yaleen, would you let me treat you to lunch? Please."

"Lunch," I pointed out, "is four or five hours away."

"Well, I don't mind, if you don't."

"Did they send you along to keep an eye on me?"

"Of course not. What possible harm could you intend us? And what harm could you possibly do, without harming yourself in the bargain?"

"You've lost me my brother," said I. "You've lost him for my parents. Forever."

"I think, Yaleen, that you and they lost him a long time ago. But don't think of him as vanished. Don't count on his not being hailed as a hero, one of these days."

"A hero — of what?"

"Of the knowledge of why things are as they are."

"And of how to alter them?"

Hasso remained silent.

"He'll be so alone," I went on. "Utter strangers, different customs, always having to sneak around and pretend. ..."

"Not necessarily. He *is* a man, after all. Who's to say that they won't welcome him over there? Just as soon as he checked out the lay of the land. And as to loneliness, maybe he was alway alienated. ... But you know, where one man can cross, another man can cross, too."

"Is that what it's really all about, then? Emigration?"

"Oh, come off it! Diving suits don't exactly come cheap or easily. Will you stop pulling such gloomy faces? We should be celebrating. For the first time in history something new has happened. We even know the depth of the black current now. I'll bet that's something your own guild doesn't know."

"No comment, Hasso."

"No comment asked for, either. Let's stop fencing, shall we? I *like* you, Yaleen. Those few little queries I raised a year ago were very much the second thing on my mind then. If not the tenth! And it was *you*, I'll remind you, who came looking. ..."

"Hmm."

And presently we did continue on down the stairs together. Though, both down in the town itself and later on when we returned up the Spire, I was careful not to seem to be sailing in the direction of *his* personal harbor. However, by then the real truth was that I hadn't drunk any Safe recently.

The next day again dawned bright, as usual at this time of year; though perhaps it would cloud over later. Perhaps not.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And the light winked from the same location.

The message went:

"Made contact. Woman alone gathering wood. Pretended am traveler from afar. Asked reason for black patch outside town. River worshippers burned recently. Mother caught bathing nude in river. Burned. Later daughter went mad. Questioned. Burned, too. Whom by? Brotherhood. Query? Son of Adam. Why? Incomprehension. Repeated query. River quote Satan unquote. Satan query? Woman alarmed. Tried to flee. Overtook. Tell her I am Son of Adam. On mission. Keep mouth shut. Same time tomorrow. End."

"So what's Satan?" asked Hasso, expressing the general puzzlement. "And who's Adam?"

"Maybe Satan is 'sanity,' mixed up?" I suggested. "Because the black current drives men mad. ..."

Yosef nodded. "Possibly. And possibly the word 'Adam' has a negative prefix, as in words like 'abort' and 'apathy' — and dam is a female parent? Thus: 'sons without a mother.' "

"There are quite a few of those on this side of the river," commented Hasso, somewhat acidly.

"Were you one of those?" I asked him sharply. "Was your mother a riverwoman?"

"Uh? Oh no. Not at all. Please don't leap to so many conclusions about me, will you not? I thought we'd made it all up yesterday. Well, maybe not *all*. ..."

"O.K., O.K. Sorry. So where does this Satan and Adam business leave us?"

"The answer to that," said Yosef, "is: considerably more knowledgeable than ever before. Plus, we know that some women over there worship the river, as though it were a god."

"Out of despair at their lot, presumably."

"Maybe," he went on, "it *is* a god. In the sense of a very powerful, though rather torpid being. Or perhaps a being that has other, more interesting things to think about than us. ..." He leaned against the guardrail, surveying the landscape around Verrino. "Fertile place, isn't it, our habitable zone? With a desert barrier bordering all of it, and precipices to seal off one end, and the wild ocean the other end. Rather like," and he smiled, "an ant colony in a very long trough. How illuminating it might be to watch how two seperate ant colonies developed, supposing they were separated by a glass wall midway. ... Granting, of course, the vast difference between ants and humans."

"What are you getting at?" I asked him.

"Just that, if there's a god — or goddess — around, she doesn't seem particularly worried whether her worshippers are burned alive. ... But maybe if she interfered, that would break the rules of her game?" Yosef hesitated. "And of course, if there were a higher being involved, humans could hardly hope to understand it — or perhaps

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

even to prove that it *was* a higher being. No more than an ant can hope to understand a man, however much time it spends crawling along him from head to foot. In which case, our particular tragedy would be to *suspect* that this was so — because an ant could never suspect anything of the sort in a million years."

Hasso looked impatient, and tried to interrupt.

Yosef simply raised his voice. "Yes, we would be conscious of the existence of a mystery — whenever we bothered to pay attention to it — without ever being able to solve it. Rather like the mystery of the whole universe of space and stars, itself. *Why* is it? *How* is it? We're in it, and of it; and so we've no idea. Perhaps if we could solve the mystery of the river, the mystery of existence might well come next?"

"One thing at a time, for goodness' sake!" broke in Hasso. "It's the other shore we're exploring."

"And why is there another shore, so very separated from us? I do sometimes wonder whether there can be men, who act as gods to other men — without scruple?"

"You mean those Sons of Adam? That Brotherhood?"

"No, not at all. I was wondering: Is the black current entirely natural?"

I just had to laugh. None of these men had any concept of the sheer scope of the river. It might well be a creature, or at least part of one, a tendril — its spine or bloodstream or whatever — but that it could be a *made* thing? Oh, no.

The old imp smiled at me, unoffended, and bobbed his head. "Quite!" he cried. "Quite! You're right to be amused. Far, far better that the river is an alien goddess, than the handiwork of men like gods. Or of *women* like gods."

And so we went below to the refectory, for a breakfast of boiled eggs, bread, and hot spiced milk.

"Perhaps Yosef's right," said Hasso, intercepting me on my way to the head of the stairs. "I'm going out to the glassworks and grindery today. Want to come?"

"Why there?"

"The first helmet worked a treat, didn't it? So it's only sensible to have another one on hand. Just in case."

"Maybe Yosef's right about what?" I asked him.

"About women like gods. ... Supposing that were so, mightn't some wise old guildmistress have an inkling of the truth?"

So she might. If. And supposing. But recalling my initiation on board the *Ruby Piglet*, I suspected not. Unless the boatmistress of the *Ruby Piglet* knew little and cared less. ...

"Why ask me?" said I, lightly. "I'm hardly a guildmistress."

"Who knows? Someday, Yaleen, someday ..."

Rain showered down on us on our

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

way to the glassworks, settling all the dust that had been oozing out of the cracks of the world, and soaking us both; however, this hardly mattered once we arrived at the sand pits with their sheds housing tank furnaces. Before long we were both dried as crisp as biscuits. While Hasso conducted his business of ordering a new diving helmet to specifications — with no particular appearance of furtiveness on his part — I wandered about the sheds, peering at the furnace pots and molds, the drawing hearths, and the bare-chested glassblowers playing their tubes like fanfare trumpets, arriving eventually at the grindery, where much more delicate work was carried on. The time passed quickly.

We returned to town by one o'clock under a clear sky, for the rain clouds had passed away upriver and the sun came out again; and slaked our thirst and filled our bellies with savory pancakes at a wine arbor new to me.

Later, as drowsy and replete as if we had made love, we toiled back up the spiraling stairs, pausing every fifty steps or so. I didn't know what was on Hasso's mind, but personally my heart was set on a siesta.

As as we rounded the Spire for the second time, already high above the roofs of Verrino, I saw the tiny winks of light from the far side of the river. Even as I pointed, the signal ceased.

"Something's wrong. Come on!"

We ran all the rest of the way; and I arrived with a stitch in my side.

The platform was buzzing.

Immediately Yosef saw us; he hurried over, brandishing the copied message, his face grave. He thrust the sheet of paper into my hand.

"That's all there is. He broke off in mid-word."

I read:

"Men hunting me. Surrounded. Wom—"

Without thinking, I crumpled up the sheet as though the message would go away. Gently Yosef retrieved the paper from my fist, smoothed it out and handed it to someone else for safekeeping. To be filed in the archives, of course. Then he put his arm around my shoulder.

Three days passed, and they were days of silly hope for me: hope that another message would soon blink, boasting how well Capsi was in — as thick as thieves — with the men over there.

And on the evening of the third day, on that twice-burned sward outside the settlement, a crowd of tiny figures gathered once more, and a cart was hauled through their midst, and something black was dragged from the back of the tumbrel as though it had no more bones or volition than a sack of corn; and presently a bonfire blazed, and smoke rose greasily.

It *could* have been a woman, could have been. ...

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But I knew it wasn't.

And what could they have been doing during the previous three days, those Sons of Adam, but tormenting Capsi terribly, for information?

The very next evening I signed on the brig *Darling Dog*, bound for Pecawar and home. I had no idea at all what I was going to tell Mother and Father. And I still hadn't decided this as I walked up the familiar dusty lane to our door. Contrary to expectation, in spite of all my travels this lane seemed no shorter or narrower or even dustier than it ever had before. Pecawar was just as it had always been. The world no more changes than the river changes; it flows on, and yet stays the same.

I banged the door knocker instead of just pushing on in and calling out, "I'm back." And by this choice I made myself a stranger.

Mother opened the door, and I stared at her in bewilderment, for she was a stranger, too. Her body had changed shape: she was visibly pregnant.

My first fleeting thought was: so she's replaced Capsi already! And my second thought: she's replaced *both* of us. My third sad, frightened thought was: she's forty, she'll die, it's too late to have another baby!

But there she stood, young and glowing, with the false bloom of pregnancy about her. ...

How could anybody turn back the clock like this? Way back nearly twenty years to another bout with infancy and toddlerhood and school days? But the truth about a clock is that its hour hand moves on and on inexorably — until suddenly it's back at the very same hour it was, once in the past.

"Hello, Mother." I embraced her cautiously, though she seemed to have no such reservations about squeezing me, almost to death. (Had the Sons of Adam crushed Capsi with heavy weights? Had they used red-hot pincers, and ropes to rack his bones out of joint?)

And I had my answer to the problem of how to tell her. Was it a coward's answer — or a brave one, because it left me with all the weight to bear by myself?

Now that she was pregnant, I couldn't possibly tell her that Capsi had just been burned alive over on the other shore. Not now. The shock would make her miscarry; then there would be two deaths on my conscience, double grief for them. I *would* tell Mother, of course; but not just yet — not till my next visit home, which I would make sure I timed well after the baby was born. Nor could I unload this weight upon Father alone.

And one part of me was asking, all this while: How much *had* Capsi and Yaleen ever really meant to her, or even to both of them? Or did Mother really care only about herself?

How strange, this second late motherhood of hers. I felt lost and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

alone because of it.

"I visited Capsi in Verrino," I said brightly. "I've just spent a week with him."

"Really? You must tell me all his news." Mother laughed. "Young rascal, running off like that! Almost as bad as you. ... So what are we standing here at the door for, like a pair of strangers?"

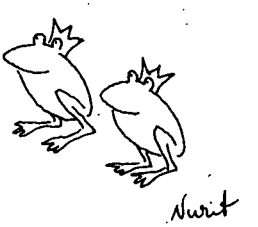
Thus, after a year away I entered my home, which wasn't *my* home any longer, but the home of a child unborn who would never regard me as a sister but only as another adult member of the family, a sort of aunt or third parent mostly absent.

I left after less than a week spent brooding around Pecawar, and signed on to sail south upon the schooner *Spry Goose*, determined to remain with this same boat for at least a year or two, as though its crew were my real family; and determined also to become an impeccable riverwoman upon it, thus somehow to compensate for my dereliction at Verrino.

And I suppose I must have succeeded in my aim, all too soon, for by the end of that same year, far down south in the steamy tropics, I was invited by my guild to volunteer for the New Year's Eve journey out to the black current.

Or maybe the guild had heard some rumor of what occurred at Verrino, and of my part in it, and was curious to know how the black current would receive me now.

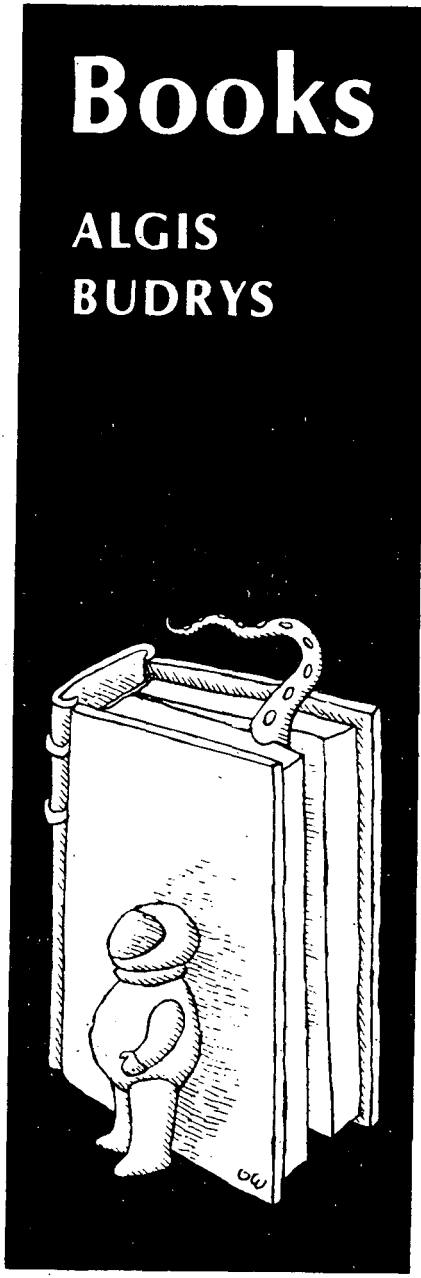
But that, as they say, is another tale.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

The Sword of Winter, Marta Randall. Timescape, $14.95.

Four Stories, R.A. Lafferty, Chris Drumm, P.O. Box 445, Polk City, IA 50226. $2.00 postpaid.

Dream Makers, Volume II, Charles Platt, Berkley, $7.95 (trade paper).

The Arbor House Treasury of Science Fiction Masterpieces, Robert Silverberg and Martin H. Greenberg. Eds., Arbor House, $16.95.

The essence of all speculative fiction, of course, is the milieu, which must be alien but not foreign. I have been telling you this for years, and *still* some of you persist in attempting to define science fiction as having something somehow essential to do with the future, or science or technology. Some of the rest of you persist in not attempting to define fantasy at all, being under the mistaken impression that the job was done long ago. And of those of you who would be willing to attempt such a definition, I suppose the majority would insist on somehow working in magic as a necessary component.

You have not been listening. Very well, here is a book to read:

Marta Randall's *The Sword of Winter* is a can't-put-down tale of high adventure, court intrigue, and death ever-ready to strike from the dark. It's very well written, meaning that it is far more than competent, yet not so superbly done that it could be considered typical only of itself. (It does contain

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

an unusual kind of relationship between two of the characters, and this lends the book the sort of charm that extra inventiveness often brings to commercial writing.)

So what this book is is an unusually good example of its genre, which is....

Well, let's try again. Lyeth, a Rider sworn to the dying Lord Gambin, gradually becomes enmeshed in the deadly plotting and counter-plotting attendant on the old tyrant's coming demise. As the heirs to the symbolic sword of autarchy over the cold land of Cherek spin their plots and seek to enlist her aid, Lyeth, member of the proud guild of messengers, only wants the repulsive Gambin's death, which will release her at last from her oath of service and free her to leave the warren-city of Jentesi forever.

But this is not to be, the omens say. That is, if such are what issue from the jeweled clockworks of the half-hysterical Maranta's astrological machine. Perhaps there's more to rely on in the coarse pronouncements of Gambin as he drifts back and forth along the borderline between this world and the next, jeering at Lyeth's hopes of escape to a cleaner setting, flatly predicting that she will serve the next sword-holder as she has served him, "Little Bitch."

Bitter enough and skeptical enough to begin with, Lyeth shies from him, from astrology, and from the youthful, seductive Laret, who certainly is an imposter if he is not also an adept in the disciplines of invisibility and swift motion. She will brook no nonsense. Lyeth declares; her life is in her own charge, and her obligations to others are nil, or soon will be.

So this is a fantasy. Set, of course, in a society where steam heating is the very latest fad, as exemplified by a marvelously realized device. all tubes, valves, enameling, ornamentation and leaks, hissing away ominously in the palace apartment of a particularly festersome courtier. And among clouds on Lyeth's future is the inevitable change in the Riders' Guild age-old role, now that the telegraph is beginning to approach reliability.

Well, then, it's science-adventure, that honorable if lately scarce subgenre once so engagingly promulgated by *Planet Stories* and brought to its peak of refinement by the late Leigh Brackett. Or it would be, if it had even one ancient fane and one sorcerer/seer in it. But, although, it has at least one character who believes he has been initiated into rites that grant genuine supernormal powers, nowhere does it contain evidence, directed at the reader and written to convince, that Laret is anything more than a clever young man not clever enough to shake off his tribe's barbarism. So what is it?

Good reading. Classified as "fantasy" by Timescape, and certain to give considerable satisfaction to fans of adventure fantasy in particular, it is essentially a tale of a time that never was on Earth, in a place not related to Earth

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

except that it has certain technologies in common and appears to have only humans for its intelligent races. There are "snowhorses," not otherwise described in detail, that might be more than just ordinary equines bred for service in the winter. There are no other living things of any sort that cannot be Earthly, there is an astrology, and there are, obviously, things functionally identical to elections and water molecules. It might be science fiction, then, and yet the milieu is essentially medieval, petcocks or no, and so it is "fantasy."

Ah hah. We recognize it as fantasy because it is set in a manner characteristic of fantasy. Fantasy is whatever you're pointing to when you say the name?

All right, then, it *isn't* fantasy. Then it must be science fiction, because it's assuredly one or the other form of speculative fiction, isn't it? Or is it a historical adventure which the clever Randall and the ingenious Timescape are attempting to foist off on the unsuspecting SF market.*

How can it be historical adventure? It relates to no real history we knew of before Randall created it. Rather, it relates to the things in human behavior, and the human behaviors repeatedly recorded in human history, that are and always have been of importance and interest to humans. They are the icons, the archetypes, the symbolic structures and representations of some sort, of what makes the human universe click and whistle, resonate and sing.

It relates, too, to nodes of crisis; to times like those of the Middle Ages and furniture such as palaces that were half fortress, and social strata that were identical with the muster-rolls of armies; to break-points in the way people lived. It vibrates, then, to the human need to think what in life is permanent and reliable, and what is mere appurtenance.

I can give you a short list of appurtenances: the future crammed full of technology, the castle full of wizards, the blueprint for omnipuissant devices, the ritual for calling out the demon. These are not the things of speculative fiction. These are the things that *stand for* the real things of speculative fiction, or there is no explanation for why *The Sword of Winter* is so good a book.

It does, indeed, contain the uncommon, uncommonly well-done relationship between Lyeth — with her own enforced apprenticeship bitterly never forgotten — and Emris, the waif of a boy. It seems clear that this relationship could only occur in a fan-

As of this writing, incidentally, ingenious Timescape had fired David Hartwell, one of SF's outstanding editors, and replaced him and his department's functions by awarding a story-development contract to a literary agency. It was one step closer to the day of corporate if not computerized creativity in SF, or seemed to be, but actually is a ludicrous, foredoomed excess.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tasy story, and yet there are no fantasy appurtenances readily visible upon it. The answer of course is that relationships very much like it could, do, and have occured over and over again in "real" human history, but only in such a tale as this can they occur as expressively as they possibly could. How can a structure of fiction limn reality more clearly than reality does? Ah, well, that's the magic in it, you see....

R.A. Lafferty could explain it to you, and probably has. Raphael Aloysius Lafferty has thought more, said more, and written down more intricate thoughts than anyone else in SF — possibly than anyone else in SF ever, past or future — and his career alone would serve to terminally blur all the nice distinctions between sorts of literature and of genres with those sorts. There is no question but that the man is an SF writer — all he does all day, apparently, is to speculate, although the front of his mind may at times rest — and equally no question that you could go mad attempting to define what kind of SF he writes.

Well, scholars, your task has been made even more piquant, and certainly no easier, by the appearance of *Four Stories*, one of the most chapped chap-books it has ever been my pleasure to behold.

Available at $2.00 postpaid from Chris Drumm, P.O. Box 445, Polk City, IA 50226, these are four stories copyright 1983 by Lafferty and hitherto unpublished. "The Last Astronomer" is relatively straightforward; it's about the life and the last day of High Rider Charles-Wain, the last astronomer to survive the shattering discoveries that the universe is really quite small, interstellar distances are ludicrously short, and that Terrestrial "astronomy fiction" has long been the favorite humorous reading matter on Mars.

"In the Turpentine Trees," however, begins to take on matters of some weight. It raises the questions of how a person might go about becoming God, how often it might have been done, and why it's not done more often. Furthermore, it provides answers.

"Bird-Master" either is or is not a recasting of certain American Indian legends, reflecting another interest of Lafferty's. Or rather reflecting that aspect of Lafferty's one interest, which is everything. It's fine, and besides being risible is haunting. The story which is in some ways the slightest of the four, but will be discussed more often because it has an easily encapsulated idea, is "Faith Sufficent," about a fake faith-healer who exposes faith-healing fakes, but at a crucial moment depends on the intervention of a mouse who can move mountains. (Say that line aloud three times quickly, and you will do to your tongue what Lafferty does to the mind.)

There you are. You can't do a study of Lafferty without being conversant with this material; I would

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

judge that "In the Turpentine Trees," at least, in some ways crosses beyond the borders of what commercial SF media find publishable, and so is an indispensible benchmark of just how much craziness we will indulge, and of what kind. So send Drumm the $2.00. I don't know how he got hold of this material, but I'm sure it's legit. Also available is his R.A. Lafferty Checklist, at $1.25: 32 pages, with notes.

The pages, if other Drumm publications are any criterion, are covered with very small type, achieved by photo-reducing typewritten copy. It comes out 16 characters to the inch — 25% smaller than elite. *Four Stories* has over 37 pages, each page 4½" x 7", with very tight margins. The whole thing looks like something produced in a basement on 8½" x 11" paper ingeniously folded, sewn (literally), and then trimmed by tearing the edges against a steel rule. The checklists — there are four others — are equally marvelous to behold. (The Hal Clement, @ 50¢, is eight pages on cardstock; the Mack Reynolds and Thomas M. Disch, at $1.00 each, are 24 pages; the Algis Budrys, at 75¢, is 16 pages and even includes my crime fiction, plus running corrections of errata.) All this apparently began with book dealer Drumm's publication of a catalog ($1.00, refundable with purchase) and has since gotten out of hand.

It seems somehow inevitable that the Laffertys of this world find the Drumms and the Drumms find the Budryses. But if we didn't have Lafferty to prepare our minds for that realization — and if Lafferty didn't have SF preparing the ground for him — we wouldn't be equipped to understand that inevitability. That makes the second circular argument* thus far in this discussion of just what it is we find in, among other places, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and what makes it unmistakably different from whatever it's different from (that makes three).

A further source of possible information is *Dream Makers Volume II*, the sequel to Charles Platt's first collection of SF author biographies. The earlier volume was generated by Platt's traveling around the U.S. and England and talking to writers who interested him, or were available while he was passing through. All but a small portion of the text was produced by face-to-face interviewing, and the book has followed its excellent initial reception by becoming a standard reference.

The sequel is a lot like that too, although the rules have been stretched and bent a little farther, including Alvin Toffler and D.M. Thomas (a circumstance on which Platt makes poignant play), Edward L. Ferman, William S. Burroughs and Robert Anton Wilson, as well as a host of right-down-the-pipe Stefnists, including

*Consciously circular, that is.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

L. Ron Hubbard and Stephen King.

Also included are Alice Sheldon (as James Tiptree, Jr.), Joanna Russ, Janet Morris, Andre Norton and Joan D. Vinge, not exactly redressing the strong male bias of the two compilations but at least whacking its shins a little. Still, although these are worthy practioners all, only Russ habitually gets very far from the plain tale plainly told, whereas some of the men in the new book as well as the old are, as you already know, takers of considerable license. I think there is still room for a complementary volume, and I think the time for its appearance is none too soon.

Still, what there is here, as distinguished from what might be here, is fascinating as ever, revelatory of a world in which Arthur C. Clarke and Piers Anthony can co-exist with Burroughs and Wilson. Each of the interviews is about 20 minutes' worth of casual reading on the first pass; a more scholarly perusal yields enough wheels within wheels — including some acute and sometimes submerged Platt observations — so that no time may be long enough.

An instant standard reference quite ready to stand beside the first volume, *Dream Makers II* comprises one-third of a unique contribution to the history of speculative fiction. What it adds up to is what Rudyard Kipling discovered a long time ago in a milieu far, far away — there are nine and sixty ways to construct the tribal lays, and every single one of them is right.

Fair enough. Now define "tribe." How extensive are we, and how do we relate to the world of literature at large?

Oh, *that* old question again?!

The Arbor House Treasury of Science Fiction Masterpieces will not quite answer it, but I think you won't care; you'll be lost in the stories.

A natural companion to the earlier and equally indispensible *Arbor House Treasury of Modern Science Fiction* and *The Arbor House Treasury of Great Science Fiction Short Novels*, the present anthology reaches back before "modern" science fiction (circa 1940) and includes such legendary precursors as Poe's "Mellonta Tauta" and Kipling's "As Easy as A.B.C.," among others, and then comes forward up through time, generation by SF generation, on up through Carter Scholz's "Travels" and Benford's "Doing Lennon."

Most of the great names of magazine SF are touched on, and their work is aptly typified by the examples given. It's a slice through the core of science fiction — the fantasy element is negligible, thus invoking an increasingly rare scruple among "science fiction" anthologies. It's also a slice through the heart. You cannot read this work, seeing Mark Twain and Jules Verne beside Alfred Bester and Arthur C. Clarke, without stopping to think what a long way we have come.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What way? Not perhaps, the way as conventionally viewed. There was a time when SF was not segregated off into a ghetto where the "real" and "good" writers never ventured, true, and we often nowadays cite that fact in pointing to SF's contemporary respectability; Wow, there we were, and here we are now! But where are we? Are we, as that sort of luxuriant nostalgia implies, so close to returning to the fold of general respectability that we can afford to look back on our wilderness years with a sort of benign glow; it was all good for us in the end, etc., etc., et goddamn cetera?

I think maybe we are. My problem is, I suspect that what we are "returning" to, tossing all sorts of baggage off our shoulders to hasten these last few steps, is not as fruitful or vigorous as where we went while we were lost. And I certainly hope that among the impedimenta we are casting aside as No Longer Wanted on Voyage, we are not discarding what sketchy maps we have of the land into which we are driven. For while it is clear that not many of us right now would like to ever go back there again, I wonder if we will always feel quite so insouciant. Certainly the fact is that where we are going is into the known, whereas behind us remains a great deal of unknown.

That used to be thought of as the place we preferred to go to, not come from.

Just thought I'd raise the point.

"We cannot escape humility."

Harlow Shapley

We aim great parabolic ears outward but
Cannot hear a single sentient sigh or
Escape the terrible thought that births
Humility: we may be deaf to their singing.

— ROBERT FRAZIER

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mr. Easton wrote a number of stories for F&SF under the pseudonym "Coleman Brax," most recently "Upgrading the Kitchen," (August 1981). His new story concerns an impersonator who is pulled out of a Nevada nightclub in order to save the world economy.

Impersonations

BY

M. COLEMAN EASTON

I've got a new act now, but the tube won't play it. Admission is by invitation, and I don't do many shows. The old days were different — Westerton days. Fifty million watched me one summer night. I thought *that* was the peak of my career.

T. K. Westerton was the oddest-looking president I've ever known. And his voice ... well, you remember his voice. For four years, he was my meal ticket.

Who was the best impersonator Westerton ever had? Who was the *only* one who could poke out his teeth at the proper angle and talk like his cheeks were stuffed with crackers? Me, that's who. Spiffy Remo. I did all the networks, turned away crowds in Tahoe. I was certain he'd be reelected; my future was riding on it.

When Westerton lost, I knew what would happen. You don't get two chances like that one. I honked into my pink silk hanky and mustered the courage to phone my agent. "Obsolete," he called me. And other things.

I'll spare you the details of my decline. The rattrap they finally pulled me out of had a bad name I don't recall. My last night in Glitter City, I was working a chubby guy at a front table — my Judas goat, I dubbed him. When he laughed, some of the others caught it and joined in. I was working Judas for all he was worth, but the act still turned sour. My Mickey and Donald barely broke a grin; Mae grabbed a few howls and that was all. Nobody cared that I had the breathing perfect, the hands, the eyebrows just the way she did them.

To add to my woes, a baldy in the back of the room was sending me shivers. He was wearing an aloha shirt and baggy pants, trying to blend in with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the tourists. With his stone jaw and ice cube eyes, I knew he didn't belong. After the show, he wedged his way into the closet they labeled my dressing room and pulled out some fancy ID cards. Small surprise: government stuff; I didn't stop to read 'em.

"I'm offering you a job. Five hundred a week," he said deadpan. No buildup, just spat it out. "Uncle needs you."

"*Me?* I got a gig."

Hairless laughed. "I can close this place tonight. Health code. Easy."

I stared at the long scar on his chin and decided he was serious. Work for Uncle? I'd done it before: three years crawling through mud. We hadn't gotten along, Sam and I. "I'm too old to dig foxholes," I said.

"Cram it, Remo. We know what you're good for." He slapped shut his leather. "Make it six hundred if you leave right now."

The money was better than I'd seen in years. And besides, what else could I do? One way or another I was finished in this place. My stuff went into a suitcase; there wasn't time to tell anyone good-bye.

The car waiting outside was government issue; I could smell taxpayer sweat all over it. My sweat. I got in the back seat and tried to relax.

Baldy introduced himself as "Angel" Steps. The bulge under his jacket was in the wrong place for wings. He sat next to me while the driver rushed us past the late-night traffic. The city was gone suddenly, and all I could see were the cactus plants that the headlights caught. Not my idea of a midnight joyride.

"You'll like it where we're going," said the Hairless Angel. "Quiet. Plenty of time for you to unwind."

I didn't like the sound of that. "I'm a city type, pal," I said. "Your green's no good to me if I can't spent it."

He snickered, leaned his head back. "You might as well sleep," he said. "There's nothing to look at before dawn."

He was right about that. I dozed some, stared out the window the rest of the time. We stopped once for gas at a dimly-lit place between towns. Steps made sure I didn't wander. It was early morning when we came to the cluster of buildings off a side road. I was groggy, but my eyelids lifted fast enough to bounce me out of my seat.

Most of the buildings had sand over the flat roofs with cactus growing up out of it. From the air, the camouflage must have been perfect. I didn't have time to wonder about that. Once inside, they made me strip off my jeans and put on one of their Good Humor Man outfits. Then I was escorted to see the professor.

Dr. Coe. Professor Coe. Looked young enough to be my kid. He was staring into space, and running his fingers through his stringy blond hair. "I've seen your tapes, Mr. Remo," he said the first time I walked in on him. "I've got a copy of everything that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fields ever did. And you do him better."

"Thanks, kid," I said. Profs don't scare me. "More fans like you and I wouldn't be here."

"I'm in physics," he said, ignoring my remark. "Nuclear, that is." His white sleeve fell back; his wrist was like a toothpick. "Back at school, I minored in linguistics. It was a lucky choice."

"I'm the best damned impersonator in the State of Nevada," I countered. "Back in school, I minored in female anatomy."

He didn't grin. Instead, he pushed some buttons and a screen dropped from the wall. Then the lights doused and some footage started to roll. Halloween, I thought. The guy on the screen wore a white cloth wrapped around his middle. His arms were furry. His mask made me want to look somewhere else.

"We call him Hoffgosh," said Young Coe. "That's not right, but at least most of us can say it."

The guy in the big white bandana was bowlegged and pigeon-toed. When he walked it was like Groucho on sprained ankles. He loped around the room swinging his big three-fingered gloves up and down.

"He won't even play Tonopah," I said as the guy puckered his fat lips. Somehow the mask had flattened his nose down to nothing. The rest of his face was so wrinkled I couldn't pick out any features.

"Sound...." said Coe. Just then, on the screen, the prof himself walked into the action with a comical strut. He was wearing white, too, but on him the cloth looked like an oversized diaper. The funny guy smacked his lips and said something like: "Ruffsosh looshish." Coe said something like: "Roffshish loosuch." Then I saw what Coe's game was. He was walking pigeon-toed and bow-legged, too, trying to mimic Hoffgosh. He looked like a frogman trying to imitate a duck.

The strange fellow gave him a few lip smacks that didn't sound complimentary. Then Coe waddled over to the table and picked up a fat pen. Awkward prof. Cut to a closeup of squiggles on the paper. Math maybe? More squiggles. Hoffgosh could hold the pen neatly between two of those fat fingers. I started to wonder what was under his gloves or whether they were gloves at all. If the mask wasn't a mask, then what?

The scribbling didn't last a minute. Cut to an overhead shot: Coe making whoosh-whoosh talk got excited, his arm went out, his hand came down flat on the table. Something told me he shouldn't have done that. The funny guy squawked when he saw it; he hot-footed into a corner. Then he pulled a spongy chair after him and sat down with his face to the wall.

"That's all," said live Coe next to me, bringing up lights. "He sulked for a day after that episode. He's easy to offend. Every time I start making prog-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ress with him, I do something wrong and he ends up in the corner.

"So," I said. "I know why you brought me here. You want me to try whoosh-whoosh like you tried. I've got to imitate this whatsis. This man from Mars."

"He's not from Mars."

"Look. I've been doing little-green-men skits since I was six. Now this guy isn't little and he isn't green, but he sure isn't human."

Coe fingered the blond stubble on his chin. Two days' growth, I figured. "All right, he's not human. He's an Ex-Tee, an extra-terrestrial. You don't have to know where he's from. He's important to us; we think he's a friend."

"And I have to talk to him. Isn't that right?" I wanted to mop my brow just then, but they'd taken away my big silk.

Coe spread his fingers out on the metal desktop. "You heard about the blackouts in L.A., didn't you?" he said quietly.

"Yeah. I even watched when they cut the neon in Vegas. Sad. But what's that got to do with this furry guy?"

"You'll see," he said. "Did you ever hear of fusion power?"

"Fusion?" Now there I had him. He thought I was a soup-brained comic till I told him I'd read the article in the *Enquirer*. That was the one that said the breakthrough was never coming. Billions wasted. Taxpayer bucks. Tough.

"Hoffgosh understands fusion," Coe told me. "He knows how to control it. He knows the answers we've been looking for. All you have to do is get him to explain it to you."

"Explain it? Why to me?"

"Because he's sensitive," said Coe, tapping a pair of pencils on the desktop. "His culture has strict ideas on how you cock your head when you say hello. If I get it wrong, he's insulted. Then he goes into the corner."

"Insulted?"

"He wasn't so bad at first. When we were learning his language, he seemed to accept our mistakes. He's been getting crankier and crankier now that he knows we know it. We need you to take over the job."

"Me?" I laughed. And then I wanted to bawl. I'd seen on the tape everything that Coe was doing wrong. His act wasn't even a joke. But get it right? Chat with the weird guy about nuclear fusion? I had the chance of a chicken imitating a chimpanzee.

I talked it over with Coe and my hairless Angel. And no, they wouldn't let me slip my contract. And no, I couldn't hitchhike back to Glitter City. Instead, they pushed me into a screening room, made me spend five days with tapes of Hoffgosh. No dancing girls. No spinning wheels. Just me and Hoffgosh.

People ask me how I pick up a voice or a walk. My answer is that it's mostly a matter of attention. When I look really hard at somebody, hard enough to make my wrist hairs prickle,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the world slows down. It's like movie slow-motion, I guess. When the slow-down happens, I can catch every shoulder wiggle, every lip curl.

And I hear everything — not deep, like when a tape runs too slow — but like a tape with lots of quiet spliced in between the words. I can catch every rasp, every little warble. That's when I listen really hard.

After that comes the practicing, of course. Twelve hours a day in front of the mirror. In front of the tape machine, if I'm lucky enough to have one. Just do it over and over until I can *feel* it's right, concentrating on myself, watching the details in slo-mo.

Frankly, I like a challenge. Hoffgosh got my interest. I applied my concentrating trick to the footage they showed me. It was just funny-face, rambling about the room, chattering as he went. Underneath were captions showing what Coe understood. After five days, I didn't need to read anything to follow the meaning.

Hoffgosh had interesting ways of expressing himself. Those three fingers could say plenty — raising the middle ones meant he was talking about tomorrow but lowering the end ones meant he was talking about yesterday. And straightening his knees meant the ExTee was hungry. I figured all that out.

They gave me some time to practice. I holed up in my room, a converted office, working with a camera that automatically kept me in focus. I wheezed and I sweated and I coughed and I barked. Hoffgosh's voice was in there somewhere, hidden in the rasps and grunts. Toward evening of the first day I began to hear it. But the next day I was so hoarse, I didn't want to talk at all. Instead, I worked on the walk all morning, gave up on that, tried the chatter again. I wasn't doing Hoffgosh. His grandmother maybe, but not Hoffgosh.

Lunch was an apple and coffee. I can't eat much when I'm working. I pulled myself back into action: improved the walk a bit, brought the voice down to the proper pitch. Then I started worrying about my hands.

Next day they fitted me with three-fingered gloves. The walk began to look passable. I was making real progress on the throaty sounds. Aside from lip-smacking, the act was beginning to hold together. I asked for another day, and Coe grumbled but agreed.

Hoffgosh's lips were shaped somewhere between mine and a gorilla's. I stood at the mirror, trying to find muscles I'd never used before. Lips out, lips in, lips twisted all around. Something would move right and then I'd have to make it happen again. Somehow I got the proper curl.

To get the sounds, though, I needed suction. Tongue against teeth, I thought. Trial and lots of errors. I needed the rest of the day to get it down.

Finally, I announced I was ready for rehearsal. They stuck a hearing aid

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in my ear and put me alone in the room where Hoffgosh was taped. The green sponge chair stood in the corner. The big table was covered with blank paper. TV cameras poked out of the walls and ceilings. First thing I asked them was to turn on some fans. Whew. The space fellow had left an aroma behind.

They had a monitor hanging from the ceiling. The screen and the hearing aid were for my cues. The earpiece would tell me what to say, and Coe, doing his best, would gesture on the monitor. I'd pick up what he was trying, and I'd do it right. That was what I thought would happen.

When they showed me the first takes I wanted to hide under the seat.

"Would you like to try again, *Mister* Remo?" Steps did not look very friendly as he escorted me back to the room. "I'm sure you'd like to try again."

So it wasn't all that easy, I thought. My own tapes had made me look O.K. I was flustered by the new room, that was all. I just had to try a little harder, let it all slow down. But dammit, it wouldn't happen. I've got to be relaxed; that's the catch. In front of a good crowd it's easy; been doing that forever. In an empty room, though, knowing they were watching me through one-way glass, I couldn't do a thing. I tried to pretend I was practicing alone, but I couldn't fool myself. I felt them out there staring, tight-lipped. Damn them.

I tried again the next day. And the next. Steps's patience was wearing thin. He offered pills, but they didn't help. He offered tequila; that didn't help either. Pills *and* tequila he wouldn't let me have. Everytime I walked into that room I felt worse about the gig. I wanted to run somewhere.

Reminded me of my first time in an agent's office. By then, I was used to an audience — read that *plural.* The more, the better; as long as *somebody* laughed I was alive. But there I was with *one* guy staring at me like I was day-old bread. One guy, with his lips glued shut, staring. Even the Little Tramp wouldn't go. The Tramp I'd had for eight years fell apart. I turned tail, raced down a flight of stairs I'll never forget. There were two wads of chewing gum on the bannister as I reached the bottom. Agents, phooey.

I tried to explain my problem to Steps and Coe. Their bright idea was to let me loose on Hoffgosh himself. "Think it over, will you?" I kept saying as they escorted me to the room. Dragged me, that is. They opened the door and pushed me in. Whew! Hoffgosh stank.

He smacked his lips and said: "Ruffsosh looshosh."

Now I had to do it, I thought. Coe and Steps were depending on me. The world economy was depending on me. The energy balance, the trade balance — all the heavy stuff was piled on me. I pictured the guys sitting behind the wall, and I made the slowdown happen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was fine for the first minute. I bent into the Hoffgosh Strut, bobbed my hands up and down. (They shoved three-fingered gloves on me, of course.) I echoed his greeting, trotted after him to the table. Groucho on sprained ankles. Perfect. Then came the hard part — keeping one eye on the monitor so I'd know what to scribble.

Hoffgosh started talking fast. I caught maybe every other word. Coe got most of it, I guess. He kept prompting me through the ear piece. Hoffgosh scribbled for a bit, and I looked up and saw what I had to draw. It all went so fast, I didn't have time to congratulate myself for being so good. Then Hoffgosh was pulling his damned chair into the corner, and I knew I'd blown my lines.

"You lost your accent," growled Steps when he dragged me out. "You straightened up and you stopped smacking your lips. What did you expect?"

I said I was sorry. How could I explain? It was the tryout in the agent's office all over again, I swear. Hoffgosh even *looked* like that agent.

We tried again the next day when the sulk was over. At the start it was beautiful. A minute later I was out on my tender parts again. Steps took me aside and reminded me of some army days I'd tried to forget. He hinted he could open the records. Maybe I'd actually been a hero, but nobody noticed. He also told me he could keep me from ever working again. Friendly, Steps was.

I had a whole day to brood about it. My technique was O.K., I thought. I started fine; it was endurance I lacked. Somehow I couldn't keep my attention on the work. I paced back and forth in the cell they called my room. It was my old problem again, all right. Even on TV, I'd always had a live house.

I lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. I was finished here, I thought. They'd get somebody else, some network clown who could work a bare room. If that didn't do it, then Coe would scrap his funny guy, send him back to wherever. That was too bad; I was starting to like the sulky whoosh-whoosh. But how could I fix it?

I started to doze off, when the answer came. After all, I had gotten an agent, hadn't I? No office audition — I got him to watch me at the club. Too bad we couldn't find a big audience here. There were some techs and some professor types and bunch of security guys. Maybe enough. If Coe had a mike, why not set up another? Put it outside while they watched me through the glass.... Steps came running when I buzzed his phone.

Next day started out the same as the others. Three-fingered gloves. Wrinkled makeup. Big white bandana wrapped around me like a toga.

"Ruffsosh looshosh." And "Ruffsosh looshosh" to you, sir. Then in my earpiece I heard the first chortles of my makeshift audience. Lope over to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

table. (Perfect!) A few howls piped to me from the back of the hall. Pen up and ready to draw. Snicker of anticipation in my ear.

Everything came right then, slow as you please. The words started and I didn't miss a cue. Applause. More applause as I pointed to his sketch and said: "Seepish reepso towash nosash." A few whistles and cheers as I added a bit to the sketch and smacked my lips. Hoffgosh went into a fit of lip-smacking, started to scrawl a lot of things. The audience screamed. When I got the long monologue perfect, they rattled the roof. Don't ask me how long we were at it. When Angel let me out, I felt I'd done three hours straight at the Palace.

So that was how I learned to chat with Hoffgosh. Every day I had a long session with the ExTee, and every next day Coe would ask for another. The audience did more for me than ten reels of laugh track, and Coe got what he wanted: lots of squiggles, lots of sketches. Finally, he said he was ready to get the lab team going on a prototype power plant. Power plant, phooey. All I cared about was a rest. I'd earned it.

They gave me a week's vacation. Anywhere in the world, they said. Steps came with me, of course. I always wanted to see the Taj Majal. I spent a long time looking at myself in the big reflecting pool. Making faces, you know. Hoffgosh faces.

I started thinking about the others I'd done: Cary and Marlon and poor unemployed Westerton. None had been as tough as Hoffgosh; none had come close. I wondered what I'd do as an encore. I turned to Steps, who was hanging off my shoulder. Asked him what would happen when the gig was over.

He shrugged, said it would last a long while. Hoffgosh might even take us home with him, he hinted. That would keep me working for years! I grinned at the thought of meeting his cousins. I really was beginning to like the old whoosh-whoosh.

Vacation's over. I'm heading back for Coe's next session with the lip-smacker. From my first-class seat, I'm looking down into the Pacific, thinking about my future and talking my memoirs into this little brown box. After Hoffgosh, can an old guy like me learn a new act? Teaching maybe? Others will want to chat with his kind. The faces I thought about at the pool, Westerton and so on, are all behind me now. I won't go back to impersonating humans. There's no challenge in that.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This is the third in O. Niemand's series of SF stories written in the style of a major American writer, here Ernest Hemingway. The first two were "The Wooing of Slowboat Sadie" (September 1982) and "The Man Outside" (April 1983).

Afternoon Under Glass

BY
O. NIEMAND

The hotel was small but clean and good. It was on Long Street, a red brick building between two tall steel and glass office buildings. Across the street was a small park with concrete benches where the workers in the offices sat and ate their lunches. There were only three couples stopping at the hotel. There were the Merbeks, who had been waiting on Springfield more than three weeks for a fast boat to Shannon. There was an old man named Stone, who was traveling with a pretty young woman. There was a couple from Smalt named Essuan, who had rented the room across the hall from the Merbeks for two days.

In the afternoons the Merbeks had nothing to do, so they walked across the street. On one side of the park there was a small place called the Café Solace. Sax Merbek decided that he hadn't had quite enough to drink at lunch. When the waiter came, he ordered rye whiskey for himself and white wine for his wife.

"I'd like just coffee," Mrs. Merbek said. "I've had enough wine already this afternoon."

"Bring her the wine," Merbek said. The waiter looked from the man to the woman. He left without saying a word.

"You're not going to do it again today, for God's sake. Sax, please, it's our last day here."

"Do it again?" he asked. He stared at the green dome overhead. "Do what again?"

"Let's not talk about it, shall we? Let's just not even talk about it."

"That's fine."

The waiter brought the drinks. He put the whiskey in front of Merbek and the wine by the woman. Each glass had its own white china saucer.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I shouldn't think it was good wine," Merbek said. "Taste it and tell me."

"Give me a cigarette, please, Sax."

"Try the wine, Elaine."

She made a gesture of annoyance. "Are you going to drink too much today, Sax? Are you going to get tight and start a row again? Am I going to have to get you safely back to the hotel by myself?"

"You don't have to worry. That's the hotel just across the street."

"Let's not even talk about it."

Merbek finished the whiskey and signaled to the waiter for another. "I think I'll have one more," he said. "You haven't even tried the wine."

"If you're so curious about it, you drink it."

"Oh, look. It's those people from Smert." The Essuans were crossing Long Street.

"Smalt. They're from Smalt. I hope they don't see us."

"Of course they see us."

"Then I hope they don't sit with us."

"Why? Have I embarrassed you enough for one day?"

Elaine stared at her husband for a few seconds. "That's it. That's just it."

The couple from Smalt came toward them. "Oh, hello," Mrs. Essuan said. "Eileen and Sax, am I right?"

"Elaine," Merbek said. "My wife's name is Elaine."

"Yes. Do you mind if we sit down?"

"Please. And you're—"

"Tom and Christina Essuan. From Smalt." When the waiter came over, Tom Essuan ordered two coffees.

"So you're from Smalt," Merbek said.

"I say, yes," Essuan said. There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Don't you think Elaine has a smashing face?" Merbek said. "Lots of men think she has a smashing face."

Essuan looked at Merbek. "Yes, she's very attractive."

"Lots of men think so."

"That's enough, Sax," Elaine said. "Why don't we see if we can find the hotel?"

"There's nothing to do in the hotel. That's why we came over here. What are we going to do in the hotel?"

"What we can do in the hotel, darling, is not make an ass of ourselves in front of these nice people from Smalt."

Christina Essuan drank some of her coffee and reached across the table to put her hand in her husband's.

"The coffee is just lovely," she said.

"That boy never brought me my drink," Merbek said.

"I am going back to the hotel," Elaine said.

"Then you just do that. You take your smashing face back to the hotel. Waiter, another rye."

"I say, dear," Essuan remarked, "I didn't know it was so late. Isn't it time for that show you wanted to see?"

"Yes," she said. She stood up.

"Stay," Merbek said. "Don't let

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Elaine's nerves drive you away. You haven't even finished your coffee. And I want you to tell me about Smalt."

Elaine sipped some of her wine. She looked up at Christina.

"Oh, do sit down. There really isn't anywhere else to go. I know all about that. We've been here for three weeks now."

"Smalt is rather nice, really," Essuan said. "We've lived there for a year. I have a little fault-shielding contracting business in two of the larger cities."

A young man waved from the sidewalk. "Look," Merbek said, "it's your young fellow. My wife has a fellow, did you know that? This young man here, I forget his name, you know, but he thinks Elaine is simply smashing. He's one of her damn fellows." The waiter brought another rye whiskey and another white saucer. Merbek began a stack of the saucers.

"Now I do think it's time to go back," Elaine said. The young man hesitated for a moment, then came toward the table. Christina looked at her husband. He drank his coffee and shrugged.

"Mrs. Merbek," the young man said pleasantly. "How nice to see you."

Her hands fluttered on the table.

"Sax, this is Perez Teyjad. He's a waiter at that restaurant we went to. You know, the one with the—"

"I know which one."

"Yes," Elaine said. "Perez, this is Tom and Christina Essuan. They're from Smalt. They're stopping at our hotel, too."

"Very nice to meet you," the young man said. Without being invited, he drew up a chair to the table. He was tall and lean and sunburned from the hours he spent beneath lamps for just that effect. He spoke in a quiet, earnest voice, pitched low so that the women leaned toward him to catch his words.

"My wife enjoys the food at the place where Mr. Teyjad works," Merbek said. "She's suggested that we eat there several times in the three weeks we've been on Springfield. In all our travels, she seems to like that restaurant best. I wonder why that is." He finished his whiskey in one long swallow, looking at Teyjad over the glass. He signaled the waiter to bring another.

"My husband is jealous, you see. He used to be a very athletic young man himself. I fell in love with him in those days. He thinks that because he is not so young and not so athletic, I don't love him any longer."

"Mr. Teyjad is the very image of myself at his age," Merbek said. "Except that I was something better than a waiter."

"Let's see about that show," Christina said.

"Why not just stay where you are," Merbek said in a harsh voice.

Essuan was angry. "I say, Merbek, that's my wife you're speaking to."

"You must understand my husband," Elaine said and laughed. It was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a forced laugh and rather unpleasant. "When he was an athletic young man, he used to win all sorts of competitions. All sorts of them, didn't you, dear? I hope to God he did. I really don't think he ever came in second. His daddy wouldn't allow it, so Sax won all the time." She sipped some more of her wine and she was surprised when she finished it. "Naturally, that was all a long time ago. May I have another glass of wine?"

"Waiter," her husband called. When the waiter came, Merbek indicated the empty wine glass.

"All a long time ago," Elaine said. She smiled brightly.

"I still win, Elaine. I still won't come in second."

"Which competitions are these, darling? I can think of a few games in which someone, oh, like young Mr. Teyjad, for instance—"

"Damn your young Mr. Teyjad!"

"I was only pointing out, darling, that time catches up with us all." She looked at the Essuans. "That shouldn't be such a difficult thing to believe, should it?"

"It's very sad," Christina said.

"Very sad, she says," Merbek said. The waiter brought the glass of wine and the glass of rye whiskey. He put another saucer on Merbek's stack.

The young man stood up. "I have to go now," he said in a cold, furious voice. "I have to be at the restaurant soon."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Teyjad," Merbek said. "Young, strong, athletic Mr. Teyjad. My wife, who certainly knows an athletic young fellow when she sees one, has told me more than once just how young and athletic you are. Well, then, are you? Athletic, I mean. We can all see how young you are."

"You're just slightly tight, Mr. Merbek," Teyjad said. "I'd enjoy speaking with you another time."

"Isn't he generous?" Merbek said. He looked around the table happily. "Essuan, isn't the young man generous? Well, we'll see how athletic he is. I have a thousand right here that I'm willing to wager."

"Sax!" Elaine said.

"A thousand. You've never even seen a thousand, have you, Mr. Teyjad?"

The young man said nothing.

"Can you run, Mr. Teyjad? I imagine you can. My wife was suggesting games, and when you play those games you get very good at hiding under beds and running with your trousers down around your ankles. Can you run a mile in fifteen minutes, Mr. Teyjad? Without the usual encumbrance of trousers around your ankles?"

"Are you betting me a thousand that I can't finish a mile in fifteen minutes?"

Merbek waved a hand in the air. "Oh, but do let me set some conditions, or it wouldn't be a true contest. If you don't have a true contest, you can't win anything worthwhile.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What I'm saying to you, Mr. Teyjad, is that I have a thousand that I'm willing to stake against your being able to cover a mile across the face of this asteroid within fifteen minutes."

Christina Essuan gasped. There was a long silence. Elaine looked from her husband to Teyjad.

"As I said, I have to go," the young man said.

Merbek laughed. "I'm glad at least you aren't easy. Five thousand, then."

"Sax, stop it!" Elaine said.

"Ten thousand," Merbek said.

They all looked at Teyjad. "I know what he's going to say," Christina whispered. "He's going to do it."

"He's going to try," Merbek said. "Aren't you, Mr. Teyjad?"

"I'll do it, for twenty thousand."

Merbek looked at the young man, and then he looked at Elaine, and then he turned and stared for a few seconds into the dark part of the café's bar. When he spoke there was wonder in his voice. "Could I have been wrong about him, do you think? Could she have been right all along?"

"What do you say, Sax?" Elaine asked.

"Of course, Christ, of course. Twenty thousand." Merbek took a thick black wallet from the inside of his jacket. He took out several bills in large denominations. "We want a pressure suit with fifteen minutes of oxygen in the tank. You'll drive out a mile from the dome in a surface car, get out, and make it back as fast as you can. Mr. Essuan, here is twenty thousand. Would you do us the honor of holding it?"

Essuan accepted the money. "I hate the idea of having anything at all to do with this."

"And would you be so kind as to make the arrangements, Mr. Essuan?" Merbek said.

Essuan looked helplessly to his wife. She was excited now by the wager. "Do it, Tom," she said. "Go into the bar and hire a surface car."

Essuan shook his head and got to his feet and walked into the bar. He came back in a little while. "Anytime," he said.

"When shall I leave?" Teyjad asked.

"Whenever you like," Merbek said. "But do go soon. It's almost dinnertime."

"I'll go now, then. That way I'll be able to collect the money and get to work on time." There was a bit of contempt in his voice.

"You must have a real calling," Merbek said. "Essuan, you will have to accompany him in the surface car. I will trust you to make sure this is carried out fairly and honestly."

"I want to go, too," Elaine said. Her eyes were very bright.

"Yes, no doubt you do," Merbek said in a tired voice. He massaged his forehead with one hand. "Stand on the sidelines with your paper pompom. Cheer the young fellow on to victory and all that."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Then let's go," Teyjad said.

The young man, Elaine, and Essuan waited for a taxi to take them to the dayside portal. It did not take long for the taxi to come. Merbek and Christina sat at the table and watched as the others got into the car and drove away.

"Well, this is certainly an interesting way to pass the afternoon," Christina said.

"Do you think so?" Merbek asked.

"Why, yes. Your wife was quite right about there being nothing to do in the afternoon. There really is nothing. And you've been here for three weeks. It must be simply awful sometimes. I say, do you do this sort of thing often?"

"What sort of thing?" Merbek looked at her and frowned. "Sit in a café and have too much to drink? Yes, I do that rather frequently."

"No, I meant wagering such huge sums of money. I must say, even though Tom, my husband, has a rather tidy income and we live comfortably enough, I don't believe he'll ever pick twenty thousand out of a wallet and put it at risk like that."

"He ought to try it. It can be damned invigorating." Merbek turned away from her and looked into the bar.

"This café is simply grand," Christina said.

"Except that you can't get the waiters to bring you a drink. Would you like another coffee, or a drink?"

"I would simply adore a gin fizz."

Merbek signaled to the waiter and ordered two drinks. This time the waiter brought them quickly.

"Thank you," Christina said. "Very nice of you."

"I hate to drink alone," Merbek said. "Well, bung-o."

"Bung-o."

There was a long silence. "I apologize if I spoke rudely to you before," Merbek said.

"Oh, never mind about that." She laughed.

"Elaine's right, you know. About the way I get when I've had too much."

"Well," Christina said.

Merbek and Christina sat on the terrace and watched the people walking by on the sidewalk. There were people wearing the odd costumes of their home worlds, and other people who did not want to be taken for tourists, and occasionally there were natives of Springfield who did not want to be taken for natives. The traffic in this part of the city was made up mostly of taxis and buses filled with tourists stopping at the hotels. Now and then a sidewalk annie strolled by, shrewdly looking over the crowd in the café. Merbek caught the eye of one pretty young woman and quickly looked away.

A taxi pulled up at the café and Elaine and Essuan got out. Essuan paid the fare and the cab drove away. "We're back," Elaine said.

"I suppose he got out all right?" Merbek said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Just fine," Essuan said. "I say it was interesting to ride out across the surface. We all had to wear pressure suits because he was getting out. The suits are supposed to be cooled, you know, but it was damned hot. He'll have more of a contest than he expected."

"I'm sure," Merbek said.

"There's a flat plain all around the dome," Elaine said. "But it's dreadfully torn up with craters and ridges and things."

"And damned hot," Essuan said.

"Yes, it was hot," Elaine said. "What time is it?"

Essuan looked at his watch. "Well, we let him out at twelve minutes past four, and then it took us twenty minutes to get here. It's 4:32."

"Then he is already in the air lock," Christina said.

"But you have no idea of how bad the traffic is in the city at this time of day," Essuan said. "He won't be here for twenty minutes or half an hour more."

"I know something about competition," Merbek said. "I used to be rather good in my day, you know. I used to be a runner, a damn fine runner." He swallowed some whiskey.

"A sprinter?" Essuan asked. "Or distance?"

Merbek smiled. "Both," he said proudly. "I used to run the hundred meters, the two-hundred, the four-hundred, the eight-hundred, the fifteen-hundred, and the five- and ten-thousand. I never took up the marathon, though. Always thought it was more theatrical than athletic."

"And you always won?" Christina asked.

"At the games on Virtu I won seven gold medals in those events. No one else has ever won seven gold medals in one competition."

"Then why didn't you go out to watch him run?" Christina asked. "I should have thought you'd be interested."

"I couldn't do that. You compete only when you have something left to prove. I am no longer the competitor. I am now the challenge. It isn't the running that will test him. I must wait for him to come to me, because he is trying to conquer me, not the distance." He finished the whiskey in his glass and laughed. "I am the contest, and Elaine is the prize."

"I say, in any event he ought to be here soon," Essuan said.

"Then let's have one more round before he does," Merbek said. "I'm sure I'll need it." He called the waiter and placed the order.

They talked and watched the traffic pass by the café. Teyjad still hadn't arrived when the waiter brought the drinks.

"What time is it now?" Elaine asked.

"I say, it's already four minutes past five," Essuan said.

"If he used the full fifteen minutes to get back to the dome, that would

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

make it 4:27. He should have been here by five o'clock," Elaine declared.

"The traffic," Essuan said.

"Yes, of course," Christina said. They watched the street, waiting for Teyjad to step from every taxi that paused in the slow-moving knot of vehicles on Long Street.

"Christina, you know what you've been told about too much excitement," Essuan said. "This suspense is bad for you. I'll take you back to the hotel, and for dinner we'll go to the restaurant where the young man works. He'll tell you all about it later."

"If you think that's best," Christina said.

They stood up and Christina walked away from the table. Essuan reached into his pocket and took out the twenty thousand. He gave Merbek a black, reproachful look and dropped the bills on the table. Then he joined his wife. They waited for a break in the traffic and crossed the street and went into the hotel.

"What are you going to tell him when he gets here?" Elaine asked.

"Why should I tell him anything? I'll give him the money. I don't see why I should be gracious about it, too."

"Sax, don't think he doesn't know that you're using him to make some silly point. He's a smart boy."

"They're all smart boys at that age."

"When he's old enough, he'll realize that you humiliated him."

"The twenty thousand will bind his wounds. That's something else I learned a long time ago. What do you want me to say? 'Congratulations, you're the better man. Take my wife and my money. I'll just go up to my room and put a shawl around my shoulders?' I won't do that."

"Don't talk rot, Sax. He's just a pretty boy. He never meant anything at all to me."

They sat in silence for a long time. The lights in their hotel went on and the workers began to leave the office buildings. In a little while the artificial twilight began to lengthen the shadows. A taxi stopped beside the café and a young man and a girl got out, laughing as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Merbek and his wife had finished their drinks, but the waiter did not disturb them. They watched as the cars on Long Street switched on their headlamps. In a little while no more people came out of the office buildings, and the traffic in the street thinned.

Elaine put a hand over her eyes so that Merbek would not see that she was crying. He saw anyway. After a while she got up from the table. Her face was as drawn and drained of color as Merbek had ever seen it. She ran out of the café and through the cars and into the hotel.

Merbek stared after her. For a long time it was as though he were dreaming. Then he called to the waiter. "Bring me one more rye," he said. The waiter nodded.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The waiter came with the whiskey and put it on the table.

"You've been very patient," Merbek said. "I'd like to buy you a drink."

"I'm very sorry, sir," the waiter said. "The manager doesn't permit us to drink while we're working."

"No? Then what time are you finished? I'll buy you a drink when you're finished."

"Seven o'clock, sir."

"I'll wait," Merbek said. He drank the whiskey quickly and stood up and went out of the café.

The waiter watched him walk unsteadily across the street. When he saw that Merbek had reached the other side safely, he went to clear away the things on the table. He saw a small pile of money lying beside the stack of white saucers. They were all large bills. *"Meu Deus,"* the waiter whispered. He looked up and saw that Merbek had gone into the hotel. The waiter folded the twenty thousand and put it into the pocket of his apron. Then he picked up the whiskey glasses and white saucers and went back into the bar.

"Beautiful day."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In which Michael McGuffey, at the end of his rope, makes a deal with the devil, not quite the usual deal...

Nothing To Lose, Nothing To Kick

BY
JOHN MORRESSY

Michael McGuffey was good but not great, and that was the curse of his life. He wanted recognition, approbation, and applause; he got polite nods and preoccupied smiles. He longed to hear his name shouted aloud from a million throats; instead he heard himself called "Mike Whatsizname." He ached to be a celebrity; he found himself slowly growing invisible.

On the gloomy eve of his thirty-fourth birthday he sat alone in his shabby room reviewing his life, and saw that it was all a consistent pattern: a downward spiral to obscurity which seemed to be steepening as it descended. He was doomed to be the hero's pal, the sidekick, the blurred face in the corner of the great man's photograph, coat-holder to winners. It had always been so, and surely would not change now.

In college he had played varsity basketball, always second string. He scored few points; he was best at assists. He was accepted in a law school — not one of the great ones — and after graduation joined Baer, Barron, Withers and Cyr, a small office that specialized in doing the drudging groundwork for larger, better-known firms. He married a pleasant, fairly attractive girl, they rented an unpretentious apartment, and he reconciled himself to the fact that his life was unlikely to blossom suddenly into the spectacular. It would not be bad. But greatness was simply out of the question.

In their third year of marriage, his wife walked out. A few days later, while he was at work, she returned with a U-Haul van and took everything they owned.

McGuffey worked to forget. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

took to cruising singles bars, drinking heavily, and alienating every woman he met by his maudlin monologues. Baer, Barron, Withers and Cyr let him go. He drank even more.

He found himself in a tense and stormy relationship with an aspiring actress, and through her he developed an interest in the stage. In time, he was offered a supporting role in a neo-absurdist drama far off Broadway. He believed that his moment had come at last. The play closed during the first performance, when no one returned to the theater after the intermission.

McGuffey gritted his teeth and sought fame in letters. He wrote a novel that told his story and his generation's in vivid, uncompromising terms. Accepted on its thirty-seventh submission, the book was published during a newspaper strike. It sold eighty-one copies. When McGuffey sent in his next book, *A Voice Without Reply*, he received a printed rejection slip by return mail. The editor refused to accept his frantic calls, and returned his letters unopened.

Now he was at the end of his tether. On the brink of thirty-four, he not only felt like an aging failure, he was beginning to look the part. His skin was pallid and sagging, his hair graying, his eyes vacant. If ever he was to be the great and famous man he felt he deserved to be, the process had to start soon. Very soon. Tonight.

He looked out the grime-coated rain-streaked window at the darkening skies and shook his fist angrily. "Why are you doing this to me?" he whined. "I want to be a celebrity! I deserve it!" He turned from the window and flung himself on his hard, narrow bed. "I'd give everything I have to be a celebrity," he moaned. "I'd give anything to anybody, if only he'd make me famous," he mumbled into his lumpy pillow.

A voice popped into his head, cool and impersonal. "Anything to anybody? Are you positive?" it asked.

"Absolutely!" McGuffey cried.

And at once there was a knock at his door.

He sat up, startled. No one had visited him in friendship for so long that he had grown as wary as a fugitive. He rose from the bed and made his stealthy way to the door.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Is this the residence of Mr. Michael Aloysius McGuffey?" a cool and impersonal voice — a familiar voice — inquired.

"It is. Who are you?"

"I have some business with that gentleman, and it cannot be properly conducted while we stand on opposite sides of a door. May I come in?"

McGuffey hesitated, then unlocked the door. The caller did not have the voice of a common thief, nor a thief's manner. And even if he should turn out to be a thief, there was nothing here worth stealing.

The caller turned out to be a tall, slender man in a closely fitted blue pin-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

striped suit. He wore a bowler hat and carried a briefcase and a pencil-thin umbrella. His hair and moustache were ginger-colored, his eyes a pale blue, his nose thin and high-bridged. He looked exactly like McGuffey's conception of a London solicitor.

He stepped inside and looked about, as if appraising the occupant by studying his habitat. McGuffey suddenly felt grubby and inadequate to a more than customary degree.

"You'll have to forgive ... I wasn't expecting ...," he mumbled.

His visitor settled into the least dilapidated chair, placed his briefcase and umbrella by his side, and laid his hat on the arm. Looking up, he said, "I take it you're Michael McGuffey. Is that correct?"

"It is, Mr. ... Mr. ..."

Reaching inside his jacket, the caller drew out a card case, extracted a calling card, and handed it to McGuffey. In raised black letters, it read: "Alistair Burne-Brymstone, K.C.S.E." It was very cold to the touch.

"Well, what do you want, Burne-Brymstone? If you're here to tell me that someone wants money, you're wasting your time. I have the clothes on my back, and not much more," McGuffey said listlessly.

Burne-Brymstone waved off the suggestion and shook his head emphatically. "We're well aware of your financial status, Mr. McGuffey, and have been for quite some time. I'm not here to ask for money," he said.

"What, then? A legacy?" The very sound of the word thrilled McGuffey. "Has someone left me money? Did Uncle Warren finally—"

Again his visitor waved his words away with a well-manicured hand. "This is a business visit. A few minutes ago, you made an offer. I'm here to discuss terms."

"What offer?"

"You said you would give anything to anybody who would make you famous."

"Did I? Yes. ... I suppose I did."

"Oh, you did, Mr. McGuffey. You very definitely did. You were quite impassioned on the subject. Does the offer still hold?"

McGuffey felt a sudden uneasiness. He studied Burne-Brymstone more closely. There was nothing about the man to suggest anything but the utmost respectability; all the same, this situation unsettled him. How could anyone have overheard those muffled words?

"In case you're wondering how I know, we maintain a constant monitoring service for such things," Burne-Brymstone said with a reassuring smile.

"On me?"

"On everyone."

McGuffey paused to digest that bit of information. He knew that the resources of organized crime were enormous, but had never suspected that they were quite this enormous. It might be a sticky business that he was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

getting into ... but if they promised to make him famous. ... He blurted, "What's your offer?"

"We will give you five years of fame and fortune, to your specifications, in return for your soul."

"My soul? Then you must be..."

McGuffey's voice failed him. He had steeled himself to deal with the mob. The devil was something very different.

"I am," said Burne-Brymstone, with a slight nod.

"But you're English!" McGuffey protested.

"My dear chap, isn't that what you expected? After all, you're Irish."

McGuffey looked at the dapper, smiling, unmistakably Anglo-Saxon figure before him and recalled his grandmother's tales of the old country in the days before the Easter Rising. "You're right, Burne-Brymstone. I haven't thought about it for a long time, but you're right."

"Of course I am. Now, is there anything you'd like to discuss before we get down to signing?"

"Yes. Why do I only get five years? Anyone I've ever heard of was offered twelve, or even twenty-four."

"My dear McGuffey, you must realize that costs have skyrocketed over the past few centuries. We simply can't afford to offer terms like that these days. On the other hand, thanks to technology, it's possible to accomplish more in terms of real, solid depravity in five years now than in fifty years then. So actually, you're coming out ahead."

McGuffey shook his head. "Technology or not, five years isn't twenty-four."

"Don't take this personally, old chap, but you're not Faust, either."

"Make it ten."

"I'll go to six, McGuffey, but that's my last offer."

"When would it begin?"

"Whenever you like. Generally, it's effective upon signing."

McGuffey took a deep breath. "All right, now. Just a minute. I want to get everything perfectly clear. If I sign over my soul to you — assuming that I have one — at that very moment of signing, I'll begin to become famous. Right?"

"If that's what you wish. I think it's best to be very precise in stating your conditions. It avoids hard feelings later on."

"Do you think I'd try to cheat *you?*"

"My dear chap, everyone does. So please state your precise desires."

McGuffey nodded, holding up a hand for patience. After a bit of thought, he said, "I want international fame and recognition for my artistic achievements, and the health and money to enjoy my fame to the full."

"Is that all?" Burne-Brymstone asked languidly.

"It is not all. I want overwhelming success in everything I undertake. I want the unstinting, unquestioning

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

love of breathtaking ladies of my own choosing, and no waiting around for it. I want the fear and respect of the powerful, and the adoration of the masses. I want instant, awed silence when I enter a room, and then a thunderous outburst of cheers and applause and an upwelling of blind approbation for my magnificence. That's what I want, Burne-Brymstone. And I want it effective upon signing."

"I see. That would be Form 12-A."

When Burne-Brymstone had withdrawn the proper form from his briefcase and gone over it carefully, he passed it to McGuffey for his perusal. McGuffey read it slowly, with extreme caution, regretting his long estrangement from legal matters. It looked perfectly fair and straightforward, but he could not help feeling suspicious. The firm he was dealing with did not have a good reputation. Burne-Brymstone sat back in his chair, showing no sign of impatience at the delay.

"There's just one change I'd like made. A minor one," McGuffey said. Burne-Brymstone raised an eyebrow in a show of mild curiosity, and he went on "In Article VII, I'd like to insert the words 'if any' after the word 'soul.'"

"Mr. McGuffey, you surprise me. Our records show that you're a Catholic, and here you doubt the existence of your soul. Dear me."

"I was raised Catholic. Now I'm sort of an agnostic."

Burne-Brymstone chuckled. "Even now?"

"Well ... I'm still not sure about souls and all that."

"Since *we* are, I think the change is permissible. Will you sign now?"

"Don't you want to write in the changes?"

"No need for that. Just look it over and see that the language is satisfactory."

McGuffey turned to Article VII. Printed neatly on the form was the altered wording. He felt a chill in his stomach and, not wanting to give in to his fears, he snatched at the proffered pen and scratched his signature above his printed name. As he finished the tail of the *y* in *McGuffey*, a telephone rang.

"That will be for you, Mr. McGuffey," Burne-Brymstone said, taking the pen from McGuffey's fingers and reaching for the contract.

"But I don't have a phone."

"You do now. Your New York agent is calling."

"I don't have an agent."

"You do now. Eight of them. And they're all suddenly very busy."

McGuffey rose and made his way dazedly to the gritty windowsill, where a bright red telephone rang on. He turned to excuse himself, and saw his visitor already at the door. Smiling, Burne-Brymstone clapped his bowler on his head, waved, and said, "*Au revoir*, Mr. McGuffey. I'll see you in six years."

And then he was gone.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

From that moment, Michael McGuffey's life was totally different from all he had ever experienced or imagined. He was the celebrity to end all celebrities.

A Voice Without Reply was bought for an advance that made worldwide headlines and rushed into print with a $5 million publicity budget. McGuffey scarcely had time to complete his tour of all the major cities before beginning rehearsals for his starring role in the fifteen-night miniseries based on the book. After two days' rest, spent chiefly in listening to rave reviews read to him by his current mistresses, he was off the Coast to begin work on the film. Since he wrote the script and composed the background music, produced and directed, and played the lead role, his days were full. His evenings were spent at the brightest supper clubs, his nights in dalliance. And each morning he rose at dawn, bursting with vitality, to greet an eagerly waiting world.

He became a universal idol. His appeal transcended all barriers of age, sex, language, culture, race, and nation. Eskimos and Ituri pygmies, hairy Ainus and Lapps, Bedouins and Fuegians named their offspring, boys and girls alike, after Michael McGuffey. His smiling face was postered everywhere, from the Great Wall of China to Chichén Itzá, from the Kremlin to Timbuktu. His voice, singing the award-winning songs from the award-winning musical version of his award-winning *A Voice Without Reply*, flowed from speakers in elevators and waiting rooms, supermarkets and discos, cocktail lounges and Concordes. He was as omnipresent as the weather.

He golfed with presidents and came in nineteen under par. He sang for the queen and received a standing ovation from the entire royal family. He drank the Politburo under the table, and after downing one last tumbler of vodka, went directly to the Bolshoi, where his *Afternoon of a Faun* won him ninety-three curtain calls.

McGuffey's charm and wit in accepting twelve Oscars for the film of *A Voice Without Reply* moved the Academy to invite him to serve as master of ceremonies in succeeding years. His Nobel Prize acceptance speech became an overnight classic. He was *Time's* Man of the Year for five years running.

His opinion was sought by everyone, on every subject. He made public his thoughts on elections, health, ecology, the economy, the Middle East, auto safety, civil rights, sports, and the space program — and people listened. He appeared on television at least four nights a week, sometimes as sole guest on one of the better talk shows, sometimes as interviewee, more and more often as special host on a program of unusual significance.

In a single year, seventeen new artistic, cultural, and literary organizations were formed for the sole purpose of conferring awards on Michael Mc-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Guffey. His paintings initiated the Excessivist movement, which swept Western Europe and Japan and caused a crisis behind the Iron Curtain. They were housed in a museum of his own design. His "Variations for Percussion, Four Voices, and Orchestra" was given its premiere performance at Kennedy Center, where it received more applause than the president.

McGuffey was incessantly in motion, and he traveled like a potentate. His personal hair stlylist, manicurist, makeup staff, dresser, secretaries, doctor, and chess coach rode with him in his personal limousine. His media liason team followed close in their wake, and bodyguards were before, behind, and on all sides. He was never alone, always surrounded by people — and he loved it, loved it, loved it.

As his sixth year of international celebrity passed its midpoint, Michael McGuffey began to think seriously about his future. He liked the life he was leading, and did not want to exchange it for an eternity of something almost certain to be nasty.

He assembled his legal staff, swore them to absolute secrecy, and revealed the terms of his agreement with Burne-Brymstone. No one appeared shocked. They looked noncommittally at one another and asked to see the contract. He produced it; they studied it. For a time, the room was silent.

Kilkenny, senior partner in the firm, looked at Katz, the other senior partner. Katz raised an eyebrow and shook his head slowly.

"A very interesting document," Kilkenny said.

"Short, clear, to the point ... exactly what we've always warned you not to sign," Katz said, turning sad, reproving eyes on McGuffey.

"You weren't around when I signed it," said McGuffey irritably. "What I want to know is how I can get out of it."

Katz cleared his throat, sighed, and said, "As my partner says, Mr. McGuffey, it's an interesting document."

"What does that mean, Mr. Katz?"

"If you'll pardon the colloquialism, it means you're screwed, Mr. McGuffey."

"Screwed?" McGuffey repeated in a small, tight voice.

Katz nodded, slowly and solemnly. Kilkenny adjusted his glasses, coughed, and with an encouraging smile said, "Now, if you could prove to these ... people that you have no soul, Mr. McGuffey, your problem would be solved. The way this is worded, you'd get to keep everything, and they would have no legal recourse."

"But ... I mean, we're all intelligent men ... this is the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages ... nobody believes in that stuff anymore. ... Do they?"

"It looks as though Burne-Brymstone and his people do. And they've kept their part of the deal," said Kilkenny. "If you have a soul, they're entitled to it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Think of something!" McGuffey said, his voice rising. "Get me out of this! Fight them!"

"No court would touch this," Katz said mournfully.

"Then think of a deal!"

"With *those* people?"

McGuffey dabbed at his forehead. He looked around the table at the assembled members of Kilkenny and Katz. Two hundred years of legal experience, degrees from the best schools, influence, contacts — they had to have a solution.

"All right, then," he said, controlling his voice with a conscious effort, "we don't fight and we don't make a deal. What are the other options?"

At the far end of the table, white-haired old Vickery piped up, "In any case of this nature that I'm aware of, the approach has been prayer and repentance. How do you feel about that, Mr. McGuffey?"

McGuffey stared at him in horrified silence. The silence drew on for a tense few minutes, and then young Woodby, junior member of the firm, said softly, "If I may suggest something..."

"Suggest, suggest!" cried McGuffey.

"Incorporate."

Around the table, twenty voices gasped, then cried in unison, "Exactly what I was about to suggest!"

"Do you mean that I'm not incorporated? Every celebrity is incorporated! How did you miss incorporating me?"

"When Congress voted unanimously to exempt you from the jurisdiction of the IRS, it appeared unnecessary," Katz said. "Now, of course, if you deem it—"

McGuffey raised his hands for silence and turned to Woodby. "So I incorporate. What does that do for me?"

"There's a famous decision rendered by Sir Edward Coke in the case of Sutton's Hospital, the essential point of which is that corporations have no souls. Lord Thurlow subsequently restated the concept in more vigorous terms: 'They have neither a soul to lose nor a body to kick,'" said Woodby with a prim, professional smile.

"Are you sure, Woodby?"

"Absolutely certain, Mr. McGuffey."

"If this is so simple, why didn't Burne-Brymstone think of it? How could he blow something like this, Woodby?"

"A mistake, Mr. McGuffey, An oversight. Pure error."

"Do you mean *those* people make *mistakes?*" said McGuffey, unbelieving.

"According to everything I've ever heard, that's how they came to be 'those people,' Mr. McGuffey. They underestimated the opposition."

McGuffey sank back in his chair and let out a deep sigh of relief. He chuckled to himself, then laughed aloud. Leaning forward, he drummed his fists on the polished tabletop in an outburst of glee, and shouted, "What

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

are you all waiting for? Incorporate me!"

Burne-Brymstone was prompt to the very second. McGuffey received him in the auditorium-sized game room of his Palm Springs *pied à terre.*

"Are you ready, McGuffey?" Burne-Brymstone asked.

"Quite ready, Burne-Brymstone."

"I must say, you're taking this well, old chap. Really remarkably well."

McGuffey shrugged and gave a little negligent wave of the hand. "Drink?" he asked, raising two glasses.

"I suppose we have time for one. One for the road, as it were. I usually figure in a few extra minutes for the inevitable desperate appeals and carrying-on, you know, but it appears I won't need them."

"Not at all," McGuffey said, smiling. He poured two generous measures of twenty-five-year-old scotch, dropped an ice cube in his, and handed the other to his caller, He sipped, then casually said, "No appeals, no carry-on this evening. Except possibly yours."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, old chap."

"I won't be going with you, Burne-Brymstone. It's all perfectly legal. I'm a corporation now, you see."

"What?" said Burne-Brymstone, suddenly turning pale.

"A corporation. And we corporations have no souls, as you probably know. I have the papers here, if you'd like to check, and the citations are all marked for you," McGuffey said, gesturing to a long table on which rested an imposing row of legal tomes.

"Incorporated. Of course," said Burne-Brymstone numbly. "I always forget about that. Oh blast." He emptied his drink and held out the glass.

"Have you done this before?"

Burne-Brymstone nodded. "I've been raked over the coals for it a dozen times."

"Bad luck, old chap," said McGuffey. He poured his caller a fresh drink and dropped an ice cube in his own, feeling that it was best to remain on the alert until all was settled. Handing Burne-Brymstone his glass, he said, "You're taking this quite well. I suppose you know that under the terms of the agreement, I'm to go on just as I am."

"Of course, McGuffey. You will go on being world-famous for the rest of your long, long life. In fact, you'll become more famous every day. It's all in there."

"That's very generous of you."

Burne-Brymstone smiled. His composure was restored. "Not at all. And whenever you're ready to come along, you need only say so. We'll be listening."

"I admire your tenacity, but I'm afraid you'll be wasting your time. I like this life." When Burne-Brymstone made no reply, only smiled a little more smugly, McGuffey felt a sudden frightening suspicion. "You can't take

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it away from me. The agreement was clear on that point. Don't try to trick me."

"Trick a clever fellow like you? Wouldn't dream of it, old chap. I mean exactly what I said. You'll become more famous every day. Every hour. You'll be more and more in demand everywhere. Only..."

"Only *what?*"

"Only from now on, you'll hate it."

"Now, wait a minute, Burne-Brymstone," said McGuffey, shaken. "Wait just one minute. We have an agreement. You can't go back on an agreement."

"My dear fellow," said Burne-Brymstone, rising, "we promised you fame, and we gave it — in generous measure. We never promised you'd enjoy it. That was entirely your idea." He finished his drink, gave an approving little sigh of pleasure, and said, "I'll be back as soon as I hear from you. I'd guess you'll be ready to come to terms in something under three weeks. Be seeing you, McGuffey."

Left abruptly alone, McGuffey poured himself another, larger drink, and gulped it down. In another room, a telephone began to ring; then another, in a farther room. The sudden ringing of the telephone on the table nearby made him start. The ringing went on, jarring and insistent, and the upstairs telephones joined in. He fled to the window, just in time to see a press bus pull up in his driveway and a small crowd erupt from its doors. Close behind it were three packed tourist buses. The doorbells, front and back, joined their deeper, raucous note to the stereophonic ringing of the telephones. Someone began to pound on the side door, and others tapped on the windows. He heard voices calling his name.

And he was going to get more famous every day.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David Weiner's first F&SF story is a suspenseful fantasy about a TV writer who moves to the country northeast of LA and meets a local character with remarkable powers.

The Chaparral

BY

DAVID WEINER

Back in the good old, bad old days — back in the sixties, if you couldn't or wouldn't move out of Los Angeles and up to the Bay Area or a commune in Mendocino County, an acceptable alternative was Topanga Canyon. By moving into Topanga you could fulfill all the requirements of "dropping out" and "getting back to the land," while still remaining within an easy commute of your drug dealer.

Topanga Canyon ran through the Santa Monica Mountains northeast of Los Angeles. The northern end of it spilled out into the San Fernando Valley — a pulsating hotbed of middle-class values and boredom. The southern end opened up onto the Pacific Ocean and the Coast Highway.

For several years, during the sixties, it was the center of an artists' colony and the home for several movie industry people. Most of the industry people said they moved there so "the kids can get a taste of the country." The usual satellite counterculture industries moved in. Potters, woodworkers, rock bands — industries like that.

It was quite a time, and old-timers, now in their mid-thirties, still talk about it. The seventies brought inflation and separation. The movie industry couples gave their kids the opportunity to be the center of a custody fight as their credit rating dropped after the third "critically acclaimed" film. A few of the hippies grew tired of living on brown rice and slogans and became corporate lawyers in Century City.

There are still pockets of debris left over from the cultural tsunami that swept up the canyon. You can still find potters and places like the Canyon Health Food Restaurant, which still

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sells overpriced granola burgers. But the good old, bad old days left just about the same time Nixon was re-elected. The magic was gone. Half a dozen years later, I moved into the canyon.

Being a television writer has its ups and downs. When I was up, I was living in the marina, driving a Mercedes, and I had my own sailboat. When I was down, I was driving up the coast in an ex-girlfriend's Volkswagen, looking for a cheap place to live and shuddering at the idea of moving back to the San Fernando Valley.

I was lucky, I probably got the cheapest place in the canyon. I doubt it ever had to withstand the gaze of a building inspector; it was a water tower that had been converted into a two-level bachelor's apartment. I had "the best view of the Pacific in this part of the canyon," according to Darb, who was showing me the place. The insulation may be lacking and I might have to use my down sleeping bag for the cold autumn nights, but I could listen to my Fleetwood Mac tapes on the "best stereo system in the canyon."

The water tower was up the hillside behind the Horse's Mouth, a rustic feed and tack shop on the corner of Topanga Canyon Boulevard and Pacific Coast Highway. It catered to the horsey set that had always been in the canyon.

My agent had told me to use this down period to come up with new sitcom ideas. He felt that the timing wasn't right for a movie-of-the-week based on the life of Alfred the Great.

When my unemployment ran out just before Thanksgiving, it was time for me to take action. I was lucky, my timing was right; the Horse's Mouth needed help for their Christmas rush. They were selling trees in their parking lot. I met Polly Mathews, the manager.

"You'll get a ten percent commission for every tree you sell — against your salary." She was wrestling with a heavy saddle, trying to set it on a peg sticking out of the wall. I reached up to help her, but she redoubled her efforts and set it up before I could get to her.

She was a spunky one. Dishwater blonde; thin, angular body; tall, but hard to guess her height because she wore cowboy boots. And the largest, prettiest blue eyes I'd ever seen off a sound stage.

"Do you know anything about horses?" She wiped her hands on her jeans and avoided my eyes.

"Some," I lied, "I could ride one if forced to at gunpoint."

She smiled at that, and looked at me. "Well, I don't think that will be necessary." She added as an afterthought, "Do you have any references?"

"There's Darb — you know that kid that lives up the canyon? I'm renting the water tower up the hillside from him. He could probably give me a good reference until he tries to cash my rent check."

She smiled again and tilted her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

head down so that her eyes were hidden behind her bangs. "If you're renting from Darb, that's good enough for me. Can you start tomorrow?"

In the morning I helped to sell the Christmas trees that filled up half of the store's parking lot. In the afternoons, I helped unload what needed to be unloaded — hay, alfalfa pellets, firewood, and more Christmas trees. The trees weren't for the canyonites — they all had living Christmas trees that remained undecorated eleven months out of the year next to the fireplace. The trees we sold were for the well-heeled accountants that came down from Malibu and up from West L.A.

"Hey Allen," Polly called to me from the cab of her pickup. "Hop in, I'm going to need some help with this grain delivery."

I untangled myself from the ponderosa pine I was wrestling into the lineup along the edge of the parking lot. Darb waved us off as the pickup bounced onto the asphalt of Topanga Canyon Boulevard.

"What's up?" I asked as I tried to shake the pine needles down the back of my flannel shirt. "You're the last person that needs help with anything around here."

She ignored my remark. "This load is for Gunnar Larson. You might want to meet him — he's an interesting character." I heard quotes around the term "interesting character."

We went through the village of Topanga and turned onto a narrow canyon road. When the canyon widened into a little valley, the road turned to dirt. We had been having our usual hot and dry December, so the pickup left billows of yellow-white dust boiling behind it as we drove. The road was kept up enough to allow pickups and "off-road" vehicles, but not enough to allow a Mercedes a comfortable ride.

When we stopped in an oak shaded clearing, the cloud of dust caught up with us and surrounded the pickup for a moment. When it settled down, I saw the cabin. And standing in front of it was Gunnar Larson.

I felt it then, that power or presence. It came from Gunnar. I've felt it before, with certain directors and older writers. Through the years they had gained a feeling of control and of power, of themselves primarily. And they radiated it like heat from an old, well-designed, wood-burning stove. You knew they were good, as soon as you saw them at work, and sometimes just when you entered the same room they were in. The difference in Gunnar was that he was born to it.

I had just a moment to be stunned by Gunnar and his power, to stare at him from the other side of Polly, when the largest dog I had ever seen bounded up to Polly's open window and started licking her face and arm.

"Down Shep, down!" She tried to push him away, but couldn't because he ignored her. At two hundred

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pounds, if he didn't want to be moved, he wouldn't be moved. Polly gave up and started scratching him behind his ears. "Yes, yes, you big puppy," she cooed, "you like that, don't you? But how can I get out of the truck if you're leaning on the door? Hmmmm?"

Gunnar spoke the dog's name, and Shep instantly dropped away from the door. The dog's tail was still wagging as he walked to his master's side; Shep was still waiting to see what kind of fun the world was going to provide for him next.

"That's the biggest dog I've ever seen in my life," I whispered, "and he looks medieval."

Polly had the truck door open and over her shoulder she said, "He's an Irish wolfhound. Gunnar breeds 'em." She hopped to the ground.

I climbed out of the pickup and came around to join Polly and Gunnar. With her fists jammed into the pockets of her jeans and looking down at her feet, Polly introduced me. "Gunnar, this is Allen Engels. He's just started working down at the store."

Gunnar extended his hand. He seemed to tower over me; he was all height and strength. I was self-conscious of too many years spent sitting at a desk and typewriter. The only intense exercise I had done in those years was hike from my apartment down to the Marina Liquors at the end of the block for another six-pack. My wrestling bouts with the ponderosa pines and the fifty-pound sacks of alfalfa pellets hadn't started toughening me up yet; right now my muscles just hurt.

"How do you do," he said formally as he held out his hand. As soon as I touched that calloused hand, my self-consciousness left me. I felt as strong as a giant. I felt like I could empty the back of the pickup single-handedly in two minutes. No, I didn't feel it; I knew it.

It came from him — a part of me realized it as the rest of me reveled in it. My euphoria came from his handshake. When we dropped our hands, the surge of euphoria abated. There was only the lingering feeling — like the remembered sounds of music right after the last note has sounded — that tingled through me. I was freshly aware that nature was around me, in all her terrifying beauty, and this was one of the most beautiful days of my life.

Shep came up and sniffed my hand. "Yes," I muttered. He licked my wrist, and I scratched his head the way Polly had done. "He's a beautiful dog." I smiled a loadie's smile. "He looks like something out of the Middle Ages."

"The Romans were importing hounds like Shep from Ireland since before the time of Christ." Gunnar sighed, "Now Shep keeps the coyotes away from our chickens, cat and rabbits, don't you?" The dog turned his head to acknowledge his master. To me, Gunnar said quietly, "You're very receptive, did you know that?"

Feeling foolish and still smiling

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

down at Shep, I just shook my head. Gunnar sensed my discomfort and changed the spell of the moment by slapping his hands together and saying: "Let's get the truck unloaded. Otherwise I shall have several chickens and coneys upset with me by sundown."

He showed us where to stack the sacks of feed, and we had the pickup unloaded faster than I thought it could have been done. When we were finished he invited us in for a glass of wine. "I grow the grapes and make the wine myself," he said matter-of-factly.

As we were leaving, he said, "Drive carefully down by the coast; there's a thick fog coming in." Even with the sky still blue and clear above us, I didn't doubt his prediction at all. As soon as his waving figure disappeared in the ever-present dust cloud that the truck kicked up, I turned to Polly and said, "O.K., who *is* he?"

"I knew you'd like him." She grinned and shifted the pickup into a higher gear as we bounced down the canyon. Even though she didn't look at me, I could sense that her attitude toward me had softened. A coolness toward me that I had noted during the first few days was gone. I had passed a test.

As we came back onto the main road and drove between the steep canyon walls, she told me about him. He was a naturalist and had come to Topanga in the twenties — long before the road went from the ocean to the San Fernando Valley. He had written a couple of books about the ecology of the canyon and the early history of the area.

"There were some developers who wanted to build condos just north of Topanga. He organized the fight to stop the development. He must've gone to law school somewhere before he came here because he tied those corporation lawyers into knots. That's stopped them for now. That and ..." She hesitated, and then, after peeking at me from the corner of her eyes, added lamely, "other things."

"What other things?" This was getting interesting.

The canyon narrowed and the road twisted and turned as we got close to the ocean. Polly concentrated for a moment on driving before resuming. "The police still think it was vandals, I mean the developers can't really blame anyone because they were acting illegally anyways."

When I hear someone starting their story in the middle, I always find it best to let them figure it out themselves. Polly realized what she was doing and took a deep breath. "While the court case was going on, they started building the condos. They were going to build them without the permits and present us with a ... a ..." She wrinkled her nose, searching for the term.

"*Fait accompli*," I provided. That's how things sometimes worked. I had seen it happen before. "What happened?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"One night, after they had put up the framing for the condos, somebody came in and smashed it all down."

"Smashed it all down?"

"Yeah. A couple of guys who'd been to 'Nam said that the little bamboo huts over there looked the same way after a tank drove through them. I saw the site myself and they looked flattened."

"Awfully careless of those developers, letting a bunch of ecological freedom fighters get close to their condos."

"Oh, there had been threats. They put up a chain link fence around the whole thing and had a couple of Dobermans to guard it at night. The fence got flattened along with everything else." She laughed at a thought. "And the Dobies turned into puppies. The agency that they were rented from was as mad as hell — they said that the dogs were ruined — all they wanted to do was play. I didn't see them, but the people who first got to the construction site said that the dogs were wandering around, wagging their tails and sniffing at the base of the scrub oaks on the site."

I leaned back against the seat. "So the developers are stymied by Gunnar's brilliant legal footwork and a few environmentalists," I said to her. To myself I muttered, "Good."

"Oh! Did I tell you, we have a couple of Gunnar's books at the store?" I could see what she was thinking before she asked: "What did he mean when he said you were perceptive?"

"He said 'receptive,' not 'perceptive.' "

When she realized I wasn't going to say anything else, she muttered a quiet, "Oh." We both watched the twists and turns of the canyon road in silence. The fog that Gunnar predicted met us a mile from the coast.

The feelings from the encounter with Gunnar receded throughout the rest of the afternoon and early evening. Christmas shoppers came down the canyon, up from Santa Monica and over from Malibu. I went back to wrestling Christmas trees onto the roofs of Mercedes and Datsuns. It is ironic how plastic credit cards can dispel the feelings of the metaphysical.

After the last set of glowing red taillights disappeared into the enveloping darkness and fog, the feed store closed down. It was Saturday night. Polly had slipped away to her duplex a quarter of a mile up the canyon, and I didn't feel like chasing after her. Darb invited me to join him at the Canyon Cantina. "There's some great-looking hard bodies there on the weekends." With a shrug and a "Sure, why not?" I agreed to meet him there after scrubbing the pine resin off my body.

The Canyon Cantina was a cowboy bar that someone once tried to change into a Mexican restaurant, and all that was left of that attempt was the sign, a few sombreros stuck on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wall, and the mixing of the meanest margaritas I had ever had.

It was a working-class bar; GMC trucks were parked in front, next to shiny four-wheel-drive Chevys.

"Look at that," Darb nudged me with his elbow when three young women came in wearing Urban Cowgirl outfits. We were leaning our backs against the bar, holding our drinks in our hands and facing the entrance and the dance floor. No one was dancing yet, even though a rowdy Linda Rondstadt record was blasting away. I thought to myself: this is the type of place where you get hoarse yelling your conversation.

"Hey," I nudged Darb back with my elbow, "I met Gunnar Larson today — Polly took me there."

"Really," Darb nodded, "he's all right. Did Polly tell you about them assholes who were trying to build 'clown-dominiums'?" He saw my nod and continued, "Did she tell you about the bikers?" I shook my head.

"Well, O.K." He turned and faced the bar. When I did the same, our hunched bodies blocked out some of the noise and the music. "A couple of bikers were driving around the canyon a couple of years ago — during the summer. They were going up and down the fire roads. And they didn't even have dirt bikes — just heavy street hogs. They kept coming every weekend, scaring the shit out of everyone's animals. Phil from the riding stables called the county sheriff a couple of times, but the bikers were gone by the time they got there. Well" — Darb paused to sip his beer and lick his thick moustache — "they drove down Gunnar's road one morning and came out without their bikes late in the afternoon. They looked like they had the snot beat out of 'em. One of them had three busted ribs." Darb sipped at his beer again.

"What happened to them?"

Darb licked his moustache again. "All they'd say was that they had an accident — that they ran into some trees. But the funny thing was — I heard this from Arnie, you know, the guy who runs the service station across the street from the store? — that the bikes were in the middle of Gunnar's road. There weren't any trees around. I saw the bikes when Arnie brought them in. They were totalled to the max." After another sip of beer he repeated, "To the max."

I filed the story away in my mind as the music of the cantina brought me back to the present. With Darb, I turned to face the dance floor and entrance to watch the dancers and the ladies who began to filter into the cantina.

Darb nudged me again and leered in the direction of a pair of "hard bodies" that had settled down at the other end of the bar. They didn't look like my type by about a decade. But Darb was beginning to slobber — I guess they're always his type.

The music stopped. Everyone shut up as soon as they realized that they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were yelling over the music that was no longer playing. I turned toward the jukebox next to the front door like everyone else.

She had a smile I have described as belonging to a "love child" ten or twelve years ago. A smattering of freckles covered the bridge of her nose, and her eyes were squinting up with her wide smile. Her mousy brown hair was tied up in braids, and the braids encircled her head like a goddess out of a Botticelli painting. The floor-length, tie-dyed dress completed the sixties hippy look.

Even though her eyes had the glazed look of someone who was several acid trips away from reality, I still would have been content to stare at her all night — she had that particular kind of beauty. A movement caught my attention, and after I looked at the figure behind her, I felt like turning my eyes away and looking down at the sawdust on the floor.

The cord and plug of the jukebox dangled from his hand — it swung gently. That was the movement that caught my eye. That plug swinging from his cold, pale hand. He was dressed in all black — black pants, black turtleneck, and black fishing cap you hardly ever see nowadays. His teeth glistened like a wolf's fangs and his skin was a pallor of a fish's belly. Black hair curled out from under his jaunty cap and down the back of his neck. He looked only sixteen years old, but I knew that I was wrong; the age lines around his mouth and at the corners of his eyes looked like they had been smoothed out so that only the lightest trace of them were visible. His eyes were death.

When the girl spoke, what she said was so ludicrous that I giggled. My nervousness was pushing me to the edge of hysteria; I always giggled in situations like this. I wish I hadn't, though, because he looked at me.

With her beatific smile, she walked up to me and held out her hand. "Spare change?" she repeated. "Spare change for Our Lord?"

I kept my eyes down as I fumbled through my jeans. For a fearful moment, I thought I didn't have any money. I found the coins mixed with my car keys and gave her all of them.

"Thank you, brother," she said. Her blitzed eyes never left my face. "Thank you in the name of Our Lord."

As she moved away from me and through the room, asking that same two-word question in her soft voice, I still averted my eyes. I couldn't shake that caught-with-my-hand-in-the-cookie-jar-and-there's-nothing-I-can-do-to-make-it-better feeling.

We all snapped back to reality when the music blasted back on. They were gone. There was a pause for a moment, and then the bar became busy. It took two tequila shooters to get Darb back to normal. "Well," I said, shuddering with my own shooter, "are there any more colorful characters in the canyon that I should know about?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The girl and the man in black were, according to Darb, from a religious commune tucked back in a canyon off the main road. They were one of those cultural pockets left over from the sixties.

"Religious, huh? They seemed awfully spooky to be a Bible camp," I said.

"Yeah, well," Darb slid close to me, "some people say that there are a couple of ex-members of the Manson family with them." I was going to ask Darb why he was whispering, but I changed my mind. Thinking about those eyes made me want to whisper, too.

Everybody in the cantina began to settle back to normal. Maybe the talk was a little louder and a little forced, but we were all doing our best to pick up the threads of our evening.

Darb continued his elbowing of my arm every time a set of "hard bodies" came in. I didn't feel like hitting on any "body," hard or otherwise. I left Darb in mid-elbowing.

Back at the water tower, I pulled out the copy of Gunnar's book I had borrowed from the store. As I leafed through it, I picked up the tone of the book. It reminded me of all those John Muir naturalists' books I had consumed my first summer out of college. Gunnar combined a naturalist's insight with a poet's language to explain the ecology of the canyon and the surrounding Santa Monica Mountains.

I flipped through the book, skimming the prose and glancing at the photographs. The oak trees were the center of both the words and the photos. Gunnar referred to them as the sentinels and the guardians of the chaparral. The Chumash Indians in the area regarded the oak trees in the same way the Plains Indians revered the buffalo. The trees provided shelter and acorns for food. In return, the Indians placed the oaks at the pinnacle of their pantheon of gods.

The tequila was affecting me so that I yawned halfway through the book. "All these boring Indians need to do is start having human sacrifices and they could qualify as druids," I muttered as I tossed the book on the end table. I preferred the part of the book that dealt with the ecology of the area. "The fingers of the mountains that grasped at the life-giving sea." That was where Gunnar's strength lay, I thought as I fell asleep.

Work at the feed store filled my time; I moved from one sale to the next. I never felt rushed, but I never rested either. Darb kept up his anti-Christmas monologue throughout the days. He was Scrooge in Levis and flannel shirt. Even Polly felt the pressure and retreated into long silences and one-syllable answers.

Because of all this, I was surprised when Polly came up to me late one afternoon. "Hey Allan, are you doing anything on your day off tomorrow?" Her head was bent down — I could

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

just make out the blue of her eyes, peeking from under her bangs.

"Nothing important, why?" I was surprised, but I liked the way the conversation was going.

"Well, if you're going to work here, you might as well learn about horses." She looked up at me and gave me a hopeful Mona Lisa smile when she asked: "How would you like to go horseback riding?"

I loved the way this conversation was going. "Sure!" How could I answer otherwise; the smile almost made dimples appear.

"O.K." This time her dimples did appear. She gave me directions to her place. "We'll use my horses; I've used them to give riding lessons before."

Where I had plodded through the workday as an uncomplaining donkey, now I danced. "Merry Christmas!" I exploded to my customers as I tied up their trees onto car rooftops and waved them off.

"What the hell's got into you?" whined Ebenezer Darb as he waved in a pickup to be loaded with a cord of wood, "you been sipping at the eggnog set up for customers inside?"

"Nope," I laughed. "I'm just feeling the Christmas spirit. What's the matter with you? This is, after all, the time of peace on earth, and goodwill toward men, you know?"

Darb just muttered and snorted and yelled at the driver of the pickup. I left him with a laugh as I bounded up to the next Mercedes, looking for that condominium-size Christmas tree.

We were riding up a fire road, heading in the general direction of Gunnar's place. Polly was on a sleek black Arabian named Jet, and I was riding a quarter horse named Sargent. I quickly learned a secret about riding: act like you know what you are doing and it all soon falls into place. (But I was still at the stage where I felt that the pommel on the saddle was there for me to grab hold of in times of stress.)

"What did you think of Gunnar's book?" Polly rode Jet as if she were sitting on a comfortable rocking chair.

When I gave my noncommittal answer of: "It was O.K. — it reminded me of John Muir's writing," she spurred Jet into a gallop. I guess my answer wasn't the one she was looking for. Sargent stumbled into a trot, trying to keep up with Jet and bouncing me so that I felt as if my insides were going to end up blended.

Gunnar came outside of the cabin as I trotted up. Polly had already dismounted. As I slid out of the saddle, Gunnar said gently to Polly, "Galloping Jet wasn't necessary."

My legs were creaking and popping as I walked up to them. Gunnar smiled and said to me, "The stiffness will be gone in a little while." To both of us he said, "I'm glad you've come. Please come in after you have taken care of the horses." Shep loped up and started his tail wagging and his hand licking.

"Please, sit." Gunnar gestured to the sofa. "Can I get you some apple juice?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Was he anxious? Excited? The elation that permeated the cabin began to melt away at the edges. "No, nothing for me," said Polly. "Thanks, though." She glanced at me, and I knew she picked up on the anxiousness, too.

He looked at us, first at Polly and then to me. He sighed. It sounded like the wind crying through the bare branches of a tree. "There's a bad storm coming," he said absently. His eyes stared beyond us and out through the open window to the yard.

"What's wrong, Gunnar?" Polly leaned forward. His anxiety had infected her and her knee started to jiggle.

"The Commune of the Lord," he said.

That was it; the "spare change" zombies and the hundred-year-old kid with the black-hole eyes. My palms began to sweat and my leg started to jiggle.

"They're going to try to do something very evil soon. It's going to happen the night the storm comes."

"Why don't ... can't we go to the county sheriff?" Polly was trying to keep the world sane and within the boundaries that we knew.

"You know that it doesn't work that way." He shook his head slowly.

"Oh, yeah." She looked down at her hands, resting on her nervous thighs.

Things were moving too fast for me. They sounded like they were talking about a new subject. "Wait, what do you mean?"

"There have been mutilations of some animals," Polly explained. "Sheep and cattle have been found cut up ... bad." She paused for a moment to shake off the memory. "I saw one of the goats that had been killed, it ... it was a mess."

Gunnar spoke quickly. "After the animals were found mutilated, the authorities discovered that the mutilations were similar to others around the country." I think I knew what was coming next. Gunnar continued. "Mutilations associated with certain cults. The authorities questioned members of the commune, but there was no proof of the commune's involvement."

I stared at Gunnar's blue eyes. "Were any of your animals attacked?"

"No," he smiled to himself, "they know better than that."

We were all silent for a moment, turning the pages of our thoughts.

"When is it going to happen?" Polly spoke softly.

"I'm not exactly sure. It's going to happen during a storm and soon. That's all I can see right now."

Polly nodded, accepting his statement. I mentally rolled my eyes. That's all he can see! It was a long way back to the marina and its bartered cocaine ambience. Part of me didn't want to accept what was going on, the way Polly accepted it; part of me wanted to jump and scream, "I don't believe this shit!" But part of me did believe it. Being in the same room with Gunnar and Polly made me feel that it was all pos-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sible. She believed it without questioning why. And seeing her believe made me a believer. I nodded to Gunnar as we got up to leave.

I was depressed as we rode back to Polly's. The afternoon was darkening early as a line of clouds filled the horizon to the north. Gunnar's last statement kept going around and around my brain: "Try to keep the children away from the commune." I felt a chill when he said this because whatever was going to happen, I knew that I was going to be part of it.

The rain started that evening. Polly and I didn't talk much about our visit with Gunnar; we were trying to protect each other from our apprehensions. But I caught her scanning the sky — searching for dragons, I suppose. The storm was the usual L.A. variety. Drizzles and heavy mist, alternating with gray skies. We worked in mud. I don't think I ever stopped feeling that low-grade anxiety and depression I took with me from Gunnar's. I just tried to work from one Christmas tree sale to another in order to fill in the time. Polly was going through the same thing.

We drew closer together those few days before Christmas. Our fingers would touch when she would hand me a cup of coffee after I stomped inside to avoid the heavier rainsqualls. We didn't speak, both of us too afraid to acknowledge the gnawing fear. I could see that she felt it, too, by the way her eyes were constantly searching around me, looking for disaster. I suppose I looked the same way to her. Like the children we were supposed to watch out for, we clung to each other emotionally and tried to spy out the storm before it broke. When it did break, I don't think anyone was ready for it.

The weather looked like it was breaking up just before Christmas. Polly and I went to the cantina to get away from the tension. Even though the rain had slackened, the mudslides that plagued the area had started. Polly's pickup bounced over the alluvial fans that spread across the road. "Good thing we didn't bring my Volkswagen," I said over the whine of the engine.

Polly shifted gears before saying, "Arnie tows about a dozen cars out of the mud every time it rains."

The sky opened up as we drove into the cantina's parking lot. It was the heavy rain that is never expected in Los Angeles. When it does come down, it is remembered that such things are possible. The raindrops are so hard and fat that everyone stops to listen to them landing on the roof, just as they did when we walked through the front door of the Canyon Cantina. Before anyone could comment on the drum roll of rain on the roof, there was a flashbulb's blinding brightness followed by an artillery barrage of thunder.

Polly looked at me. We knew that this was the storm, and we knew that we couldn't do anything about it ex-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cept hunker down and hope. "Margarita?" I said in resignation as we walked up to the bar.

We both tried to hide our fear as people stampeded into the cantina and shook water out of their hats and coats. The drumming on the roof never stopped.

It started to happen when Darb came in. "Hey! Guess what I just heard on my CB — the canyon's closed 'cause of the mudslides!"

Cheers greeted this announcement. Drinks were on the house. A lead sinker of fear dropped down to the pit of my stomach as I stared at my saltless margarita. Polly touched my arm and leaned her forehead on my shoulder. I touched her fingers. "It's O.K., Polly, maybe nothing will happen. Maybe Gunnar was wrong." I put my arm around her and massaged her neck and shoulders. She didn't believe it any more than I did.

As we hunched closer together, the noise in the cantina grew louder. People were trying to talk over the music blaring from the jukebox. The noise was assaulting. Polly and I huddled in our space like soldiers hiding in a foxhole, waiting for the artillery barrage to end. When the front door opened, a lightning flash followed by a crash of thunder shut everyone up. All you could hear was Linda Ronstadt, complaining how pitiful she was.

Rainwater plastered his dark hair to his forehead and dripped off of his down-filled jacket. I didn't recognize him at first. His face was wrinkled up in anxiety. He tried to smile, self-conscious of the attention his entrance drew.

"Arnie!" Polly went up to him. "What's wrong?" I had never seen a man wring his hands before. But Arnie was doing it; and mashing his baseball cap in the process.

"It's the kids," he sighed. "They're gone — they're at the commune." He sighed again. "Help Marti, she — she's in the truck." He bowed his head like he had just confessed his darkest sin.

I sat back, forever the observer, and listened to the story of what had happened. Arnie's two children, nine-year-old Jason and eight-year-old Jennifer, had gone down the canyon to play with some friends. They had never arrived.

"I told them kids not to ever go near the commune!"

Marti's face had the hollow look of someone who hadn't slept in six days. Her blonde perm dangled wetly down to her shoulders, giving her a wet cocker spaniel look.

"How do you know they're at the commune?" Polly was sitting in front of her, doing the comforting things that were necessary.

Even though Marti looked like she was all sobbed out, she managed one more squeal. "The c-commune was on the way. When I went looking for them, I saw their bicycles by the road running up there. I-I went for Arnie, and when we got there, the bikes were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gone and men were there with shotguns." She stopped for a moment and wiped her eyes. "I told those kids not to ever go near that place!" The sharp edge of hysteria was in her voice. Polly nodded and soothed her with words that I couldn't hear.

Arnie had been slumped over the bar, listening to his wife and looking ineffectual. Now he turned to face his wife. "I've never seen any of them before. There were about half a dozen of them and they all had guns."

Everyone was quiet as that sunk in. It was Darb who spoke first. "Well. It looks like it's up to us to get our own guns, isn't it?"

Somebody started saying that we could call the sheriff or the highway patrol and wait for them to come in the morning.

"It will be too late tomorrow." Gunnar stood in the doorway, his quiet words quieting the room. Shep was at his side, looking around for someone to play with.

"Well," Darb took a deep breath, "let's go. I've got an M-1 back at my place. If everyone gets their guns, we can just tell them we're looking for a couple of lost kids. ..."

"Iron won't stop them." Gunnar spoke flatly.

The room started to rise up in a babble, like a pot beginning to boil. Darb muttered an "Oh yeah? How about lead?" that got lost in the rising noise. Gunnar walked over to me and spoke quickly before the noise drowned out any sane conversation. "You must get the children out before midnight." He was speaking to me.

"Me?" How did I get volunteered? "How?"

"Shep will take you to them." The dog wagged his tail at the mention of his name and started walking between the tables and sniffing hands.

"I'll go." Arnie drew himself up and tried to flatten a belly that had succumbed to those one-too-many-beers-with-the-boys.

Gunnar shook his head. "No, I can't protect you."

"I'm going." Arnie looked small and weak underneath his soggy baseball cap, but he also looked determined.

I think Gunnar knew what would happen — and that it wouldn't make any difference. He nodded his head and turned back to me. "Shep will lead you around to the back of their canyon." To Darb he said, "the rest of you can go to the head of their canyon — where it meets Topanga — if you wish." He turned back to me. "You will have to go on foot most of the way. The children are in one of the buildings nearest the clearing at the back of the commune."

Darb heard him. "On foot? In this rain? Are you kidding?" He was chewing gum rapidly, mentally loading his armaments.

"The rain will stop soon."

We were all becoming so jumpy by then I don't think any of us doubted Gunnar's words.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The taillights of Polly's pickup disappeared around a bend. The air had a crispness that comes from a thunderstorm. The ozone was high and making me light-headed. Over the sound of rushing water could be heard the continued roll of thunder that followed the flashes of lightning to the south, over the Pacific.

I could make out Arnie's hand stuffed into one pocket of his coat, fingering the pistol Darb had given him. A flashlight poked out of the other pocket, but we hoped that we wouldn't have to use it.

When Darb offered a pistol to me, I had said (possibly with too much bravado), "No thanks, Darb; what did Gunnar say? 'Iron won't stop them.' " Now, standing in the dark with dripping, unrecognizable sounds all around, I wished I had a gun to finger.

Shep came loping up and sniffed at my hand. With a wag of his tail, he was off. "I guess we're supposed to follow him," I said.

The rain had turned the ground to greasy mud. Both Arnie and I fell several times, and we were constantly grabbing branches and tufts of weeds to keep from tumbling down the canyon. If we were supposed to sneak up on somebody, we had already blown it. Shep seemed unconcerned by the terrain, he was only perturbed by our pace. He would stop his ground-eating lope, look over his shoulder and give us an aggravated whine.

Because he was ahead, Shep found the barrier first. When I came up to him, he was crouching low and whimpering. "What is it, boy?" I asked idiotically. What did I expect, Shep to talk back? In any case, I realized what it was when I heard Arnie sob behind me.

His face was twisted up in grief; he looked worse than when he walked into the cantina earlier. "I — I can't do it." He sobbed again, "I'm too scared!" Behind me Shep moaned.

I went up to Arnie. He was sitting down in the middle of the muddy trail we had been following. "Hey Arnie, what's the matter?" I tried to sound casual — I tried to counteract the chilling effect his voice had had on me.

"I can't go on. Something — I'm too scared!" His voice wailed as much out of surprise as anguish.

"It's O.K., I'll do it. You wait for me here, all right?" I patted him on the shoulder to assure him that I would be back.

Shep still crouched low and had his muzzle buried between his paws. "How about you?" I whispered. "Can you wait for me here until I bring back the kids?" He tried to wag his tail, but it barely stirred. As I continued up the dark trail alone, Shep let out a howl of pain.

The commune was spread out before me. I was at the crest of the ridge, looking down at it. Floodlights were hung from the telephone poles that were scattered between the low stucco buildings.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I guess I expected something more esoteric than stucco: an eclectic California temple, perhaps, combining the Taj Mahal with the Parthenon. Instead, there were just little pastel buildings with white blotches on them where the plaster had fallen away. They were tiny buildings, scattered about with no regard for design or plan.

Abutting the ridge I was standing on and in front of the buildings, was a tennis court. The white sidelines and baselines were still visible. The net had been taken down, and in the middle of the green cement, on the line that divided the court, was an altar.

I didn't look at it too closely — I felt about it the same way that I felt about Arnie's fear and Shep's wail. "Just do your job," I muttered out loud. I started down the hillside.

Finding Jason and Jennifer was easy. They were in the first building in which I looked. A naked bulb illuminated the bedroom that was decorated in Early Biker. A bare mattress was askew on the floor, and part of its stuffing was coming out of it. The boy and the girl were huddled in a corner of the mattress, barefoot. From their tear-streaked faces it looked like they had spent most of the day crying.

"Hello?" I said quietly from the window I was peering through. I tapped on the pane to get their attention. "Your daddy sent me to help you get out of here. Can you unlock the window?" I was still trying to speak in a stage whisper.

They looked at me blankly at first. Then the boy, who was older, came up to the window and said, "I can't." Before I could tell him to lower his voice, he went on. "The lock's too high!"

"O.K.," I was resigned to speaking in a loud voice, "get back by the door and pull the mattress over you. I'm going to break the window." There was no point in being quiet now.

There is a redeeming quality about ramshackle communes/ranches like this one. With so much junk around, you're bound to find what you need. I did, in a heavy, padded rocking chair.

What I wanted to do was just break the glass of the window, reach up and unlatch the lock. But I got overexcited. Before I realized it, I was furiously swinging the chair back and forth and letting fly through the air. I didn't have to worry about the window lock as it crashed into the room along with the frame and glass.

"Come on, come on!" I reached over the sill and helped Jason up. As he jumped to the ground, I reached in for Jennifer. She cried out as I lifted her.

"It's O.K., Jenny, your daddy's just over that hill. It's all right." I tried to calm her down as she started to sob. "I cut my foot!" she said between sobs. She clung to me and kept one foot off the ground.

"Gosh, Jenny!" Jason took this moment to act like the aggravated older brother who is always with the whiny little sister.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's O.K., Jenny, I'll carry you." I gathered her up in my arms.

"I bet she could walk if she wanted to." Jason muttered lond enough for Jennifer to hear. She started to give the automatic retort that began with, "Shut up, no I can't!" when I cut her off.

"Never mind, both of you; let's go, let's go." I wanted to get moving because I saw someone enter the room. It was the "spare change" girl who had come into the cantina. She was no longer that beatific, glowing, love-child doll. Now her long hair was matted and tangled; her floor-length dress, shapeless and soiled. She looked like she hadn't washed or changed since I saw her. But that wasn't what made me catch my breath and started my blood pounding in the ancient flight-or-fight autopilot. It was her eyes. The whites weren't white any longer — they were blood red. She stared at the wreckage in the room with those bloody, zombie eyes. As I hoisted up Jennifer, those eyes swept across the room to the window; when she saw me she screeched.

We ran and it started to rain. The clouds opened with the flash of a fireball and a peal of thunder. The fireball was like a lightning flash except that it etched in jagged course horizontally across the sky and across my retina. It zoomed from the ocean and over the ridge I had to climb, to the mountains on the far side of the canyon. The rain started right after that, as if the fireball were a zipper in the clouds, holding back all that water.

There was an alarm given in the buildings behind us; more lights came on — fluorescent ones that turned our lips and fingernails purple. We avoided the ex-tennis court with its altar and disappeared into the comfort of the dark.

"Just go up the hill, Jason. Just keep going, your father's up there," I panted into Jennifer's shoulder. She clung to me like a baby monkey. Even when I slipped and stumbled on the muddy ground, she hung on.

We reached the scrub-covered crest the same time that shots were fired back down below. I thought: Oh boy, there goes Darb proving how macho he is.

Jason looked pale and frightened when he asked me, "Where's my dad?"

"Just ahead, just down that trail." I tried to sound confident. In reality, I had no idea where Arnie was or where we were. There was a clump of oaks off to my left, swaying in the storm, that I hadn't noticed before. The trail paralleled the spine of the ridge before twisting down the dark slope. If we veered to the right and went down the slope, at worst we would eventually come to Topanga Boulevard.

I followed Jason's back as he raced along the trail. Nothing was familiar, and that added to the unease growing in me. Jennifer whimpered.

Another fireball cracked over our heads and exploded on the far side of the ridge behind us. The flight and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

crash of the fireball made us duck our heads and involuntarily look back.

There he was. I shouldn't have been able to see it, but I did. It was the same smile I saw that night at the cantina. He was smiling to himself.

I opened my arms and Jennifer dropped out of my grasp. I wanted to tell the kids to run — just like I wanted to tell myself to run. But all I saw was that smile and all I felt was a shivering blast of fear.

A silent gray shadow ran by me and shot up the hill. When Shep bowled into him, I woke up.

"Run, you kids, run." I started toward Jennifer to pick her up again when I smacked into a low-hanging branch of an oak that loomed out of the darkness. That was it for me, I was out.

I remember coming to for a moment, on a bed that was in a bedroom I didn't recognize. Polly was there, her pale hair wet and dripping onto my blanket. She was talking to someone out of my line of sight. I heard her say that I was still unconscious.

"I am not," I said gruffly before I fell asleep.

I woke up in that same bedroom. Through the window I could see that it was a cloudless morning. The storm had passed.

"Hello?" I said to the empty room. When I started to sit up, I felt the hangover. "But I haven't been drinking," I said to myself. Just about the time I realized that my head was bandaged, the bedroom door opened and Polly came in.

"You're awake!" she said. As she grinned self-consciously, she added, "That was a stupid thing to say." She sat on the edge of the bed.

"Oh no, it wasn't." I pulled her to me and held her the same way that I'd held Jennifer. "Where am I?"

"Gunnar's." She tentatively slipped her arms around me.

"The kids are all right?" I was asking even though I knew they were just from the way she came into the room.

"Uh-huh." Her arms were becoming less tentative. "Arnie found them a few minutes after you lost them — Shep was leading him up the hill to you." She hesitated, wondering how much to tell me.

"Yeah?"

"I went up there this morning. We found Shep's body — he was cut up. Gunnar said that he died well, that the blood of his enemy was on his muzzle. He's taking care of the body now." She looked down at the space that was between us. "What happened up there?"

"I'm not sure. It was their leader — the one I'd seen before at the cantina. Shep attacked him — there wasn't anything I could do." I looked away from her then. "He had a way of making you afraid." I looked down at the innocuous comforter that was on Gunnar's bed. I changed the subject. "What happened to the rest of the crazies? Was anyone hurt when the shooting started?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"They weren't shooting at us. Gunnar came by and told us not to go up the road when their guards ran back up the canyon. It was lucky that we didn't 'cause we would've been caught in the landslide along with them."

"Landslide?"

"Oh yeah, the mountains practically filled up the canyon. The slide pulled down all the oak trees on the ridges. Those people must've thought the trees were us because they shot at them just before they were buried.

I didn't say anything; my mind just continued taking it all in.

"The sheriff's got a couple of backhoes up at the commune, trying to dig out the bodies." We were both quiet, untangling our feelings about the disaster.

Gunnar came into the room. There was a quality about him that made him look magnificent. He looked like the land or a city after a storm — clean, new, and fresh. Los Angeles looks the same way after a rainstorm. For a few days the hills are green and the sky is blue and one's outlook is positive. Eventually the smog returns and life returns to the same grind.

"How's your patient feeling?" he asked, grinning. "Will he live?"

"Oh, I think so." She sat back away from me, a little embarrassed at being caught in my arms.

"Marian brought those clothes you asked for. They're in my bedroom." To me he said, "In case you haven't noticed, Polly is wearing my second-best gardening outfit."

She left the room before her blush could be fully appreciated. I said to Gunnar, "You certainly look calm and relaxed today."

He pulled a stool and sat down. "I'm happy. A great burden has been eliminated."

I was quiet for a moment. And then, because I wanted to get the pain over with, I said quietly, "I'm sorry about Shep."

Gunnar sighed. "Shep was a war dog — he died much better than either of us thought he could." Perhaps he caught my faint feeling of guilt because he added, "There was nothing you could do — there was nothing any man could do."

I nodded and looked down at the simple quilt that covered me. It was like any quilt that you could buy at a department store, and so out of character with the events of the past twenty-four hours.

I looked back into his benign blue eyes. "I remember reading about ancient Britain. That the oak trees were sacred to the druids — that they ..."

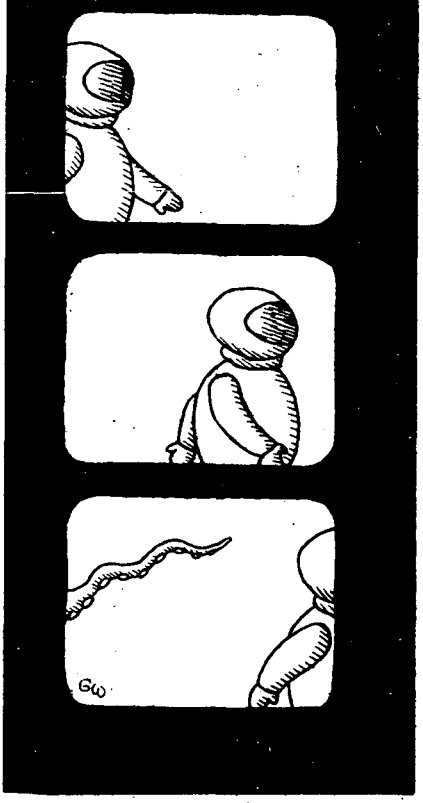
"Don't." He reached out and touched me lightly on the shoulder. "Please."

He was full of sad understanding. I understood, too, and nodded. "O.K."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

2-D 3-D

Spacehunter: Adventures in the Forbidden Zone would be a pretty flat film all around if it weren't for its 3-D process, and even that, like all 3-D processes, has its ins and outs.

Now I don't mean to imply, necessarily, that it's a *bad* movie; it's just eminently forgettable. Even now, a few days after I've seen it, the details are dim in my mind. This isn't helped by the general fuzziness engendered by the 3-D, plus the fact that the movie is photographed for the most part in deep gloom (even the outdoor scenes have all the clarity of the depths of the Black Lagoon).

The plot has something of the same quality. The general situation is simple-minded enough: a spaceliner runs into trouble and explodes; one lifeboat pod with three women (lissome and lovely, of course) escapes and makes a landing on a planet the likes of which you wouldn't want to be stranded on to save your life. A scavenger sort, named Wolff, equipped with beatup ship and late model android, hearing of a reward for the ladies' return, goes to said planet to rescue them for purely venal reasons.

But the details tend to run into each other from there. The world is a rocky one, vaguely reminiscent of the *Star Trek* all purpose planet we got to know and love. Civilization there has been reduced to savage anarchy by plague and other like catastrophes, and the three women castaways have been ap-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

propriated by some not very couth people in something called the Forbidden Zone. As Wolff searches for them, he has the usual encounters with unexpected menaces and unlikely alliances. The latter includes a grubby female urchin who attaches herself to him, adoring underneath the sarcasm (she's prone to lines such as, "Us loners have got to stick together"), and saves the day eventually, of course; at the finale, with decent clothes and her hair combed, well, by golly! — she still looks like a grubby urchin.

Some of the fights and chases go on too long — one feels they're desperately filling time — and the *Star Wars* type music is a bit too epic for the small scale action and run-down machines. The 3-D is effective momentarily, such as the traveling through the stars under the credits (scientifically nonsensical — stars don't just drift by like trees out a car window — but visually stunning) and the explosion of the spaceliner. Too often, though, it just results in visual mush.

However, there is an underlying sense that this is a working future in which other things are happening, and some unexpected moments that show imagination and wit. For instance, Wolff's android, an attractive female model, is discovered reading *R.U.R.**.

**The little-known fact of the month: it's usually thought that Capek created the word* robot *in* R.U.R., *but I recently found that the Bohemian word for the serf labor due to a feudal lord is* robota.

So it's not a dumb film, just a disposable one. Certainly worth spending a couple of hours on when it shows up on TV; with luck, the lack of 3-D will make it less murky all around.

WarGames is undoubtedly a suspenseful and well made little movie, likely to be enjoyed by a vast public. I think I'm annoyed with it because people keep coming up to me and announcing that they've seen it, as if expecting some oracular comment.

Now in the case of *Return of the Jedi* et al., I'm perfectly happy to deliver oracularly (I can be just as pontifical verbally as in writing). But *WarGames* just *isn't* science fiction, any more than *Fail Safe* was 20 years ago. An accident involving only current technology, no matter how far fetched or stretched, is simply inventive fiction; I think it's a sad indication of the technology gap that so many people think of it as s/f.

Videowares dept.... Recently available on video tape is *Bladerunner*, a movie from last year that some thought to be that rarest of things, an adult science fiction movie. Presumably this assumption was based on the deluded opinion that graphic violence and a smattering of nudity and sex do adult movies make. At this point in time, the reverse is more likely true.

Basically, the plot is the old find-the-androids one; here, the quarry being a small group of murderous late model types, the hunter a seedy ex-de-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tective with a good rep for tracking such like down. (Harrison Ford rehearsing his soporific performance in *Jedi*). The attempts to vary the formula include an ambiguous attitude toward the androids, who are given some justification for their actions (this could be the first android lib film — no, come to think of it — that was *Revolt of the Humanoids*), and a deliberate evocation of the small time private eye genre.

This is another case of some intelligence going into the *mise-en-scene* (there's a good French theater term for the combination of sets, costumes and effects that make up the background for s/f movies these days). It's a shabby, crowded, and kinky 50-years-hence we're shown, but I think misguided in places. Even in LA at that point, I doubt if it will *always* be night and raining. Philip K. Dick might well have justified those circumstances in his novel from which the film is drawn; the film itself didn't take the time to. (And there in a nutshell is why written s/f will always be more convincing than filmed ditto — it has the room to explain things.)

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

If you are planning a change of address please notify us as far in advance as possible, and allow six weeks for the change to become effective.

Be sure to give us both your old and new address, including the zip codes. Print clearly and, if possible, attach an old mailing label.

OLD ADDRESS
(attach label here if available)
Name
Address
City
State Zip
(please print)

NEW ADDRESS
Name
Address
City
State Zip

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE,
Mercury Press, Inc., PO Box 56, Cornwall, Ct. 06753

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

An astronaut's 16-month Mars orbit turns into a passage in which the ultimate Truth is revealed, but no one will believe his revelation. Almost no one...

The Lost Earthman

BY

ROBERT F. YOUNG

When they debriefed him they were struck first of all by the look in his eyes. It was the look of a man who had died and come back from death. In a sense this was true, even though Rowe had been spared physical death. When the *Demeter*'s meteor-damaged engine had disintegrated, killing Olms and Stacy, who were outside trying to repair it, and dooming the spacecraft to remain in Mars orbit for millennia, Rowe had been inside the module and hadn't suffered a scratch. He had been spared physical death, only to die psychologically.

Damage to the module itself had been slight, but the sophisticated AUDORB communication system had been knocked out, and Rowe lacked the know-how to repair it. Months alone, with no one to talk to but himself, the scarred and fractured face of Mars filling one window, the indifferent deeps of space, the other; a bone-chilling glimpse now and then of the skulls of the Martian moons; the spacesuited corpses of his fellow astronauts trailing behind the *Demeter*, out of sight, but not out of mind. Yes, in a sense, Rowe had died.

But the look in his eyes was as nothing compared to the words that came out of his mouth. The debriefers impugned those words, over and over again. Tried repeatedly to put to rout his "revelation." To no avail. For Rowe was convinced that the *Weltansicht* he had arrived at was the Truth. He had not arrived at it early or easily, but he had arrived at it, and having arrived, he was there to stay.

Ultimately, they humored him. Aside from his obsession, he was demonstrably sane. Moreover, he was a national hero. But they told him that for the time being the "thumbprint"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and the "Flood" must remain classified information (the fact that he had mentioned neither to the members of the rescue team indicated that he could be trusted). Then they cleared him for one year's leave.

God knows, he'd earned it.

The penthouse party in progress atop the Robert Moses Sky-Rise in Newer York had failed to evolve into the major social event that its hostess, the Lady Jayne Castrelle, had envisioned. Thus far, the catalyst she had injected in the person of the "Lost Earthman" (the media term persisted, even though it no longer applied) had engendered nothing except his own isolation. He stood now, shunned like a leper, in a far corner of the salon riffling through the pages of a volume he had taken down from the recessed bookcase that held the Lady Jayne's internationally famous *éditions vieilles*. Ranged round the spacious room, disengaged satellites as it were, were clusters of the varied and very important guests whom it had been his unstated mission to entertain.

In the adjacent pavilion, gaiety was the order of the night as mixed and unmixed couples writhed ecstatically to the guitar-accompanied dithyrambs of the Decibels, but as regards social gatherings of the caliber of this one, gaiety amounted to no more than icing on the cake. The cake itself had fallen flat.

The Lady Jayne was furious. Why hadn't she been forewarned that the "Lost Earthman" had been subjected to the equivalent of a laryngectomy before being foisted on the world from which he had been absent for so long? Why hadn't she been told that a single glance out of the bottomless pits of his eyes was enough to cause rime to form on the warmest of conversations?

She was furious — yes. But she did not let her fury show. She was a professional in her field, and no calamity, however catastrophic, could ruffle her exterior calm. Moreover, she maintained a staff of troubleshooters trained expressly to mend social breakdowns such as the one confronting her now.

One of the troubleshooters — the new girl — was standing fortuitously at her elbow. "Michelle — that dead man over there pawing through my *éditions vielles*. Consider him your mission tonight. Resurrect him, if you can, and move him to a less conspicuous spot. Preferably to one on the moon."

"Such a profound passage it must be, to have furrowed your forehead so."

Rowe looks up from *Pro and Contra*. He has been drinking since dawn, but his vision is acutely clear. He sees before him an exquisite glass of a girl, white-gowned, champagne bubbles rising to the surface of her face and bursting there in dancing eyes and dimpled smile and expressive tildes of brows. Her hair, long and black, lies upon the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

slopes of her shoulders like winter trees against a snowy hillside. "Ivan is about to give back his entrance ticket," Rowe says.

"How quaint."

Rowe frowns. "It wasn't meant to be quaint."

"I should have said 'absurd.' One little ticket, and all that fuss. All those words!"

Rowe closes the book and returns it to the bookcase. "I take it Dostoevsky's not your cup of tea."

"I find it difficult to take him seriously. He raved instead of wrote. I think it was the result of grand mal — don't you? Anyway, I am much more interested in spacemen whose eyes are the repositories of the quintessence of disillusionment."

"Did Lady Jayne send you on a rescue mission?"

"Yes."

"I don't need to be rescued."

"No, but her party does."

Rowe smiles. The smile is isolated from the rest of his face, a thing apart. He glances round the salon at the coteries of varied and very important people. Eyes that have been covertly upon him leap aside. The die has been cast: Lazarus will be invited to no more *converzatoni.*

"I would like to dance," Michelle says.

"... All right."

She takes his arm and they thread their way through the coteries to the french doors that give access to the pavilion. The doors are open, but the decibels of the Decibels do not reach their ears till after they have stepped through the invisible acoustic field. Then the music is all around them, loud, coarse, throbbing, emanating from a dozen hidden speakers, seemingly urelated to the musicians themselves, all of whom are nude and painted blue, standing on a platform near the parapet, thrashing their guitars.

Michelle faces him and they attune their bodies to the beat. Undulating, she says (loudly, so that he can hear), "You dance as though you'd never been away."

"It comes back."

They move out into the wilderness of writhing bodies. "Did you miss dancing?" Michelle asks.

"No. All it serves to prove, if you're of Darwinian disposition, is that man descended from snakes instead of apes."

"Perhaps. But how else can one express one's body, other than in bed?"

Rowe does not answer. The music is assailing him from all sides, bruising his tympana, yet somehow it seems light-years away. Michelle, too, seems light-years away. Why? He is not schizophrenic. They would have given their eyeteeth to have been able to pronounce him mad. But they failed. He is as sane as they are. Saner. For he alone accepts the Truth. He alone saw the thumbprint. It was there all along, staring them in the face, but he alone

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

saw it for what it really was. But he can understand their reluctance to believe him. The thumbprint, in order to be perceived, had to be viewed from exactly the right altitude, under exactly the right circumstances, and over a long period of time.

The Decibels have paused between numbers. Michelle asks, "Have you visited Lady Jayne's all-u-kin-eat buffet?"

"No."

"Her all-u-kin-eats are famous for their diversity. There isn't a delicacy or an exotic dish you won't be able to find. I should think that a man who subsided on space rations for almost two and a half years would be ravenous for such gastronomic delights."

"Gastronomic delights to me would be considered by the Lady Jayne as offal. I come from a subpoverty-level family who considered themselves beefeaters when they could afford chuck steak once a month. My favorite dish is sowbelly and dandelion greens."

They have left the pavilion and reentered the salon. "At a Lady Jayne Castrelle all-u-kin-eat it's possible to become a gourmet in one easy lesson."

"To me," Rowe says, " 'gourmet' is synonymous with 'glutton.' "

"I'm beginning to understand," says Michelle, smiling, "why Lady Jayne feared for the life of her party."

"I didn't ask to be invited to it. But come," he adds, "if you want to visit the buffet, I'll go with you."

"I, too, am conditioned to less elaborate fare. Shall we walk in the garden instead?"

The Lady Jayne views their exit from afar. She is please to have got the "Lost Earthman," temporarily at least, out of her party's hair. She makes a mental note to increase the new girl's stipend. To think she had qualms about hiring her! "I don't think you'll do," she had said when Michelle first came to her. "You are lovely — yes. But in an unobtrusive way. Sex should shout these days — not go about sotto voce. Subtlety is no longer *comme il faut* — if indeed it ever was." Then Michelle looked at her with azure eyes, and all her doubts dissolved. "But I'll take you on, despite my better judgment."

She is glad now that she did.

In Rowe's eyes, the Lady Jayne Castrelle's garden is on a par with her buffet. He was brought up in a rare region of meadows and stands of trees. His favorite flowers are gentians and columbines; in autumn, asters and goldenrod. Here, hybrid roses overrun intricate trellises, weighing the night air with their cloying scent. Everywhere there are parterres of gaudy blooms he doesn't know the names of. Topiary in the form of satyrs, unicorns, and nymphs abound. A white-pebbled path winds mazelike to the front parapet where an aircab beacon juts stalklike into the sky.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The sky is bejeweled with stars. The running lights of sky traffic wink on and off like swarms of fireflies.

Michelle says, "It is an ugly garden. It lacks a motif."

They find a bench and sit down in the scented half-dark. Rowe raises his eyes to the heavens, searches for Mars among the stars. It is not there; this month it is the morning star. He recalls the innumerable times in orbit when he searched the blacknesses for the distant sapphire-shard of Earth and wept each time he found it. But that was before the revelation. After the revelation he no longer wept.

He assumed at first that it was a voluntary revelation, but subsequent thought told him otherwise. The potter may leave incontrovertible evidence of his existence behind when he creates a defective pot, but he is unlikely to call attention to it. Even so, Rowe no longer wept. What was there to weep for?

Q. This "print" you describe. You say it's immediately north of Olympia Mons?

A. There are two prints, actually. One immediately to the north, the other to the northwest. The former is unquestionably that of His thumb. The other may possibly be that of His forefinger. West of the volcano there is a similar pattern that may have been created by the by the edge of His palm, but that is pure speculation.

Q. It's all speculation, isn't it, Commander? Speculation of the wildest kind imaginable. The fractures and ridges that comprise your so-called "prints" were classified long ago as eroded volcanic flows. They constitute exactly the sort of surface features one would expect to find in the vicinty of a massive shield volcano like Olympia Mons. Granted, they *look* like macrocosmic fingerprints; but don't you find it odd that the geologists who studied them failed to interpret them as such?

A. Not in the least.

Q. Would you be kind enough to explain why?

A. First of all, a geologist is incapable of seeing one inch beyond his geological nose. Like any other specialist, he works in a smug little room crammed with data relating to his specialty, and refuses to look out the window. Second, the geologists in question were working from mosaics of high-resolution photographs sent back by *Mariner 9* and, later, by *Viking* orbiters *1* and *2*. The photographs were excellent ones, particularly the latter, but the best of photographs is still nothing more than an exact recording of what the camera saw. Its very objectivity is self-defeating. The human eye, regardless of how many times it has been likened to a camera and vice versa, is *not* a camera. When a person sees something firsthand, he does more than merely see it — he *experiences* it. Unless he experiences it, he can't relate it to his personal frame of reference, and can't accurately identify it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Q. Are you arguing that subjectivity is essential to a true interpretation of reality?

A. To reality as we know it — yes. Kant to the contrary, I don't see why any other kind should concern us.

Q. You still insist, then, that the eroded terrain north of Olympia Mons constitutes one of God's thumbprints?

A. Yes. Left there by accident sometime during the Creation.

Q. Before or after the "Flood"?

A. I have no idea.

Michelle murmurs, her shoulder lightly touching his, "Were you as taciturn as this before your — your ordeal?"

"Probably not."

"The Lady Jayne expected great things of you. She envisioned you as the cynosure of her gala gathering. She saw you scintillating like a diamond among admiring rocks."

"The Lady Jayne was misled."

A breeze breathes through the garden. Michelle's hair lifts and falls, brushing his cheek. "You won't always be taciturn, will you?"

"No. Someday I'll shout the Truth. From the housetops. From the mountains. From the hills."

"The Truth?"

He does not elaborate. Instead, he turns and looks at her. Her face is a flower in the starlight, a rose in its own right. A white rose, somehow sad. He wonders why he doesn't bend his head and kiss the petals of her lips. He has not known a woman in over two and a half years. He should be ravenous for one. Ravenous for this one, so fortuitously dumped on his lap. Looking at her, he finds it difficult to associate her fragile beauty with sex. Difficult, but not impossible. He feels faint stirrings within him. He hears himself saying, "Do you live in Newer York?"

"I am staying here."

"Will Lady Jayne reprimand you if you come up missing for a spell?"

Michelle smiles. "Being a troubleshooter for the Lady Jayne entails periodic absences. I'll get my purse."

When she returns, they walk over to the parapet. Rowe actuates the aircab beacon. It winks on and off as they stand there waiting for one of the "fireflies" to separate itself from the swarms and descend to the rooftop. After a long while, one does. "Your place or mine?" Rowe asks.

"Yours."

The aircab lifts them high above the city. It is a raft, really. A helium-filled raft equipped with a battery-powered propeller. The night is warm and there is no need for the canopy to be raised. The wind of their passage fans their faces as the propeller fans the summer air. Michelle's hair drifts, floats, shimmers. Rowe's, grown shoulder-length in space, streams behind him like a dark wake.

His apartment is in one of the refurbished buildings of the old section. There is a dinette-kitchen, a bath, a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bedroom and a living room. He came to Newer York directly following his debriefing. He is not yet ready to go home. The fields and streams and stands of trees of his boyhood are no more — housing developments have eaten them all up. The house he was born in still stands. In it, his father lives with a whore of Babylon. His mother died when he was nineteen. Maybe he will never go home. Maybe Wolfe was right.

In Newer York he has felled media men left and right with burning glances. Even had he not been sworn to silence he would not talk. He is not ready to yet. Ready to reveal the Truth. But someday he will be. The networks, so greedy for his words, shall have them, and the Truth shall be shouted to the whole world, shall flow like a mighty wind and topple steeples and level shrines and blow in the staid windows of scientific institutions. *And I looked, and lo! below me I saw proof of His being and of His vengeance.*

"Mix us a couple of drinks," he tells Michelle as he turns on the lights. "There's booze in the cupboard and ginger ale in the refrigerator."

She heads for the kitchen. He sits down on the sofa and turns on the big holosole that, like the sofa and the rest of the appointments, came with the apartment. Michelle returns presently and sets two brimful glasses on the coffee table. She seats herself beside him. "There."

He says abruptly, "I don't get it. You're not this kind of girl."

"What kind of girl are you referring to?"

"The kind you're obviously not."

He tunes in a "nostalgiac." Like hoards of others, it has been preserved for all time. Quinn Martin made immortal. Unfortunately, the addition of a dimension has in no way enhanced the original.

He takes a huge swallow of his drink. Another. "I tried to get drunk after they finally cleared me. I couldn't. I still can't. I keep seeing — seeing—"

"Yes?"

Her azure eyes are full upon him, her gaze intense. Is it concern he sees upon her face, or professional curiosity? Mental gears, running independently of one another, suddenly mesh. He has known but few women in his lifetime, but he has known enough of them to know that his instinctive remark of a few minutes ago was on the mark. This girl is *not* that kind of girl; ergo, what is she doing in the Lady Jayne's stable?

"Yes?" she says again. "What is it you keep seeing?"

"Nothing." Then: "I don't even know your name."

"It's Michelle."

"Michelle what?"

"Michelle will do."

The meshed gears, turning so swiftly, begin to slow. He takes another swallow of his drink in an effort to speed them up again. "Do you work

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for NASA directly, or are you from the CIA?" he asks abruptly.

"I don't understand," she says, but her eyes tell him that she does.

He rushes on. "I don't trust what made me assume that an organization that doesn't trust anyone — that can't afford to — would make an exception of me. Maybe all that time alone really did scramble my brain. Anyway, you can send back word that I haven't talked. At least not yet."

"Talked about what? I still don't understand."

"The hell you don't!" Rowe says. He starts to get to his feet, only to find his legs have gone numb. He sinks back into the cushions, darkness gathering along the periphery of his vision. The mental gears, so smoothly functioning a short while ago, have become cumbersome, lethargic. He feels Michelle's hand touch his forehead. He tries to turn his head away. It will not turn.

Q. What evidence, Commander Rowe?

A. The polar caps. The fact that they're composed of water ice instead of frozen carbon dioxide, as previously supposed. The presence of water in the crust and the regolith.

Q. Water ice, even in large quantities, doesn't necessarily indicate a flood. What other evidence can you supply?

A. Valles Marineris. The so-called "chandelier." Nirgal Vallis. Mangala Vallis—

Q. It's been fairly well established that Valles Marineris are the result of fractures caused by magma withdrawal. On the other hand, many of the channels on Mars are unquestionably the result of water flow; but this hardly constitutes evidence of a flood. Certainly not one of the proportions you describe. To recapitulate: Do you seriously expect us to believe that in creating Mars God left his fingerprints behind; that there was a species of Martian mankind; that God was so disgusted by his own creative ineptitude that He abandoned the project and got rid of the Martians and every other living thing down to the minutest microorganism by means of a Deluge of which He gave no forewarning — and which, by the way, wouldn't have accomplished His purpose in any case?

A. I don't expect you to believe anything. You're so mired down in scientific sludge you can't see any farther beyond your nose than the geologists can.

Q. The hell of it is, Commander Rowe, ordinary people aren't "mired down," as you so quaintly put it. *They'll* believe you. Because you're an astronaut. Because you were there. And we simply can't allow that to happen. It would jeopardize the entire space program. But we'll set that aspect of the problem aside for now and take up the matter of your reaction to your "discovery." This so-called Truth you arrived at sometime during your sixteenth month in orbit, not long

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

after you'd identified the terrain north of Olympia Mons as a "thumbprint" — why did it depress you? You'd found evidence of the existence of a Supreme Being, hadn't you? According to your dossier, you're a devout Presbyterian. Why, then, weren't you exalted?

A. I'd been led to believe that God, being both omniscient and omnipotent, was incapable of making a mistake. Yet Mars unquestionably was a mistake — a glaring mistake. Which left me with a fallible God — one I couldn't — can't — accept. And consider this: If He made one mistake, isn't it probable He made many more? Maybe the entire cosmos is a mistake. Maybe—"

Q. Are you implying that *Earth* — and, by extension, the human race — was a mistake?

A. I should think that *that* aspect of the Truth would be self-evident.

Michelle's hands are gently massaging his temples. Her face is close to his. He manages a feeble whisper. "What did you put in my drink?"

"I put nothing in your drink. I have no need for potions." She touches her lips to his forehead. "Sleep, little Earthman — sleep."

The black curtain that descends before his eyes rises almost immediately. He is lying on a vast plain. A great winged creature stands above him. He recognizes Michelle. A thousand stars have encrusted themselves into a diadem for her head. She holds a huge sword vertically above him. Its burnished blade flames as it descends, but he knows no fear. He has been lost too long. He welcomes the point of the blade as it plunges into his chest.

The blackness of his hangover is undeniable, but it is undeniably not the blackness of death.

Dawn is in the room, wearing a drab gray dress. Michelle has gone. The lamp on the end of the table next to the sofa emits a pale and sickly glow. Snow is falling in the cube of the holosole.

He may have passed out, but he did not blank out. The events of the night before and the dream that climaxed them do a vivid playback before his eyes. When the playback is over, he feels like a fool.

He gets up, goes into the kitchen and brews coffee. It does little for his black headache, but after three cupfuls he is sober. Sober for the first time in days—

Perhaps years.

The magnitude of his obsession, now that he has shaken free from it, dumbfounds him. The "thumbprint," the "Flood," were bad enough; but how could he have believed, even in a dream, that one of the Lady Jayne's deluxe whores was an apocalyptic being come to exact punishment for his apostasy?

Indeed, he had been lost too long.

At a later, more appropriate hour,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he will contact NASA and lay the "thumbprint" and the "Flood" to rest.

Meanwhile, he will pack, and make arrangements for his deferred journey home.

The first rays of the morning sun cascade through the kitchen window and collect into a golden parallelogram on the tile floor. *Fool's gold. ...* The thought is no more than a whisper in his mind. It is gone almost the minute it materialized, and the lips that would have formed it break into a vacuous smile.

"Madam, as of this morning I am terminating my employment."

The Lady Jayne turns from her supervision of the cleaning up of the salon. For a split second disappointment shows in her cold blue eyes. "I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't realize the assignment I gave you last night would be so distasteful."

"I did not find it distasteful. The time has merely come for me to go."

"Go? Go where?"

Michelle does not answer. "Remuneration for my services," she continues, "will not be necessary. You can donate, if you like, whatever amount I have due me to the church of your choice."

"Very well. It shall go to Saint Angelica's."

"As you wish. Good-bye, madam."

The Lady Jayne watches her walk lightly into the garden. Such a strange girl! On an impulse she goes over to the archway and peers past the parterres and the trellises and the topiary to the parapet where Michelle stands waiting for an aircab. The Lady Jayne glances back into the salon to see whether all is going well. The aircab must have come at once, for when, a moment later, she looks back at the parapet, there is no one there.

Coming soon

Next month: "New Year's Eve at Tambimatu" the second novelet in **Ian Watson's** compelling series, THE BOOK OF THE RIVER. Plus a stunning new novella by **Russell Kirk,** titled "The Invasion of the Church of the Holy Ghost." You won't want to miss these stories or this issue. The coupon on page 162 offers you an opportunity to subscribe or to send F&SF as a gift at our special Christmas rates, a substantial savings on the newsstand price.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Steve Gallagher is twenty-seven and lives in England, where he has written for British radio and TV. His first novel, CHIMERA, was published recently in the U.S. In 1980, the author did a good deal of traveling in Western USA, which gave him the background for the superior fantasy you are about to read.

Nightmare, With Angel

BY
STEPHEN GALLAGHER

Dianne thought that her father had never looked sicker than when he let the blond-haired stranger out of his office. She'd heard some of the shouting that had marked the last stages of the argument, most of it coming from Big Jim, and she'd left her housekeeping trolley alongside thirty-five and moved to look down over the rail.

Jim Raines held onto the doorway, watching. The stranger went down the covered way by the laundry room and then turned out of sight by the pool into the main court of the motel. He'd arrived the previous day in a powder-blue Olds and with hardly any baggage — a salesman or some similar kind of traveler, Dianne would have guessed, with an accent that she'd placed somewhere around Atlanta or Augusta. He had squarish good looks that faded from your mind as soon as he turned away. Raines stared for a moment at the empty space where the stranger had been, but already the fadeaway magic was beginning to work. The midday sun was on the pool, and its dancing highlights in the covered way limelighted his pallor and made it seem worse. Then, slowly, he turned around and went inside.

Dianne stayed at the rail for a minute or more, wondering if she ought to go down. Big Jim hated to be bested even in the most trivial squabble — it was one of the reasons why he'd never been able to make a real go of the motel. When the guests got spiky, Big Jim threw them out. He'd had some comeback from the chain's management board, but somehow they'd stayed in business for nearly fifteen years. Finally, she decided no; there wasn't anything she could do, and she risked getting the leftovers of her father's anger.

All the same, she was troubled.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Thinking about the bustup picked little holes in her concentration, and she started a complete make-over on one room that only needed straightening. Ten minutes later she saw the Georgia tie salesman (as she'd already named him) get into his car and roll out of the court; he seemed in no big hurry, and he didn't take his one suitcase with him.

"Looks like someone been and gave your daddy one big scare." It hadn't taken Dianne more than half an hour to finish on the upper level, but Viola had still beaten her to it. She was sitting in an inelegant sprawl on one of the poolside chairs and fanning herself with some kind of brochure.

"He's got some trouble with his heart," Dianne said. "The doctor gave him pills." It sounded hollow, even though it was true. She made it to the bottom of the stairway without tripping, straining to see over the armload of yesterday's towels. Viola tilted her head back and fanned a little harder.

"Nothing wrong with Jim Raines's heart that a little softenin' wouldn't help," she said. "Sorry and you bein' his daughter, but that's the truth."

Dianne carried the towels through into the laundry room and dropped them on the floor by the old Bendix. It was cooler in here, mainly because of the concrete floor and the unpainted cinderblock walls, but it still wasn't cool enough to be comfortable. Minnesota skin wasn't made for Arizona sunshine; even though they said that four or five summers got you used to it, she was still waiting.

She could use her key to get a chilled Dr. Pepper from the machine in the covered way, but she still remembered Big Jim's reaction last time he came to check the accounts and she'd forgotten to keep score. Instead she decided to settle for a cup of free ice from the next machine along.

"What were they talking about?" she said as she dug into the ice chips with one of the disposable glasses from the downstairs trolley. Viola, still sprawling, looked at her.

"Just because your daddy shouts the tiles off the roof, it doesn't mean I'm going to listen to his business."

"Come on, Viola."

"Well...." Viola glanced toward the office doorway. It was suitably empty of Big Jim Raines. "It's not my concern, but when a man from the *mo*-tel chain comes along and says you got to straighten yourself out because someone's lookin' over your shoulder, I'd say that's the time to listen."

Dianne took her ice back into the laundry room and ran some water over it. The Georgia tie salesman, working for the motel chain? Somehow she couldn't see it. He'd paid his bill in advance, and on the couple of occasions that she could remember motel people stopping by, the bills had always gone onto the company account. But then another, more awesome possibility occurred to her, one that might even explain Big Jim's uncharacteristic reaction —

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and she put it straight out of her mind. No point scaring herself until she had the facts.

There was a mirror over the laundry room basin, half its silver freckled away by the humidity of the big machine and a corner missing. She sipped at the water and looked at her reflection. She saw slim forearms tanned as they were ever likely to get, hair that was middle-brown and nondescript but had a good shine to it, features slightly irregular but nothing to put her in the fright show. She tried on a smile.

(But even as she tried to distract herself with the mirror, there was a persistent subroutine in her memory that wouldn't let go of the blond-haired stranger. It tried again and again to fill in the hole where his face ought to be. Only the eyes were fixed, unpleasant points like hammered-in nailheads.)

When the wash was in, Dianne slammed the door to the Bendix harder than it needed. She was only making things worse by accepting the situation so easily, and she knew it. Helping out in summers and at weekends had been one thing, even for a few weeks or months as a stopgap after she'd finished school as she decided what she was going to do with her life; but before she'd known it, the housekeeper routine had *become* her life. And now the outside bell was ringing, and after a half-dozen rings it was obvious that nobody else was going to answer the office phone.

She threw the switch to start the machine, and went out into the covered walk. Viola was poised, half-levered out of her seat, and probably had been that way for a few seconds in the expectation of being beaten to it.

"It's O.K.," Dianne said, already on the move, "I'll get it."

"Your daddy just lit out for town at some high speed," Viola offered as she settled back and picked up waving her brochure. Dianne turned away, carrying with her an afterimage of Viola looking down at the cleaning things on the green carpet that stood in for poolside grass, as if she had a slim hope they might take on life and carry on working without her.

The office was locked, and Big Jim's three-year-old Monza was missing from its usual spot alongside the big sign. He'd have switched the telephone through to the outside bell before he left, but it would have helped if he'd warned her. Dianne let herself in and closed the glass door behind her, shutting out the bell, the low thunder of the traffic on the I-40, and the afternoon heat.

The buzzer on the small switchboard had been muted with a piece of foam rubber taped over it. It was difficult to hear it from the other rooms of their apartment, but that was preferable to the undamped sound, which was worse than broken nails on a blackboard. Dianne raised the counter flap and stepped under; the buzzer stopped.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She sighed, and lowered the flap. At least it gave her the excuse to cool off.

The office was a kind of no-man's-land, a paneled and glassed-in area where home and the motel merged. If there was any kind of boundary then it had to be the counter, but to Dianne it no longer even had a symbolic significance.

Big Jim must have been going through the files. Two of the drawers were open, and there were papers and an open ledger on the work surface below the countertop. She thought of the Georgia tie salesman, walking away slow and confident, and of Big Jim hanging onto the doorway and looking as if he'd been bled white.

The switchboard started to buzz again. She picked up the phone.

"Three more rings and I was going to leave you wondering," the girl's voice at the other end of the line taunted. Bobbie Elrod.

Dianne said, "Dad's out and I was working." She lifted the counter flap one-handed so that she could pull the wire to its limit and sit on one of the low, soft customer seats.

"That's just what it sounds like," Bobbie Elrod said. "Want to come out and play tonight?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Vince Avery's back for a couple of days. We can go down to the Moon Pool and simper at his new badges and listen to him telling cop stories."

"I don't think so," Dianne began, but it seemed that Bobbie was expecting at least a show of evasion.

"Come on," she said, "you might even enjoy yourself."

"I hardly know him."

"Who says you have to? It's just a few beers and a bunch of people. Leave your miserable disposition at home and have some fun."

"What miserable disposition?"

"Aha, I got your sore spot! Think about it. Every time somebody comes up with a suggestion, your first reaction is an excuse. You're growing up in all the wrong ways, Dianne."

Something moved outside the glass; Dianne saw Viola peering in for a moment. *I'm damned if I'm going to feel guilty*, she thought to herself, and she turned her head away slightly. Viola shuffled off. Dianne felt guilty.

"If I can get the car," she said, "I'll call in for an hour."

"Don't bust a rib trying, will you?"

The day was dying hard as she drove the Monza down to the 66 intersection. Over toward the Black Mountains, the sky was turning the color of scorched lead. The Moon Pool was a combined pizza hut and coffee shop on the far side of town, a five-year-old one-story building that could consider itself at least as well established as most places in Kingman.

She could see Earl Ellis's cherished pickup by the entrance as she pulled into the parking lot. There were no more

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than half a dozen cars altogether, and one of them was Bobbie Elrod's blue Fury. She parked the Monza alongside it and got out, locking the door behind her. It was almost dark, and Spencer had switched on the overhead lights.

There were no pool tables in the place, although a tiny percentage of Spencer's business came from passing truckers drawn in because they misread the sign. Business would probably pick up around nine, but that was still an hour away, and for now the main room was almost empty. Bobbie and the others were around three checker-clothed tables that had been pushed together over in the far corner, with beer pitchers and Coke bottles and half-empty plates of natchos on each. Besides Bobbie, Dianne recognized Earl Ellis, Neal Embry, and the two Altenheim girls. There were three or four others that she didn't know at all.

Bobbie stood up as she arrived. "Take a seat," she said, "I'll be back in a minute," and then she made off toward the rest rooms. Dianne sat, feeling awkward.

Vince Avery was halfway through one of what Bobbie had called his "cop stories." He was training at the South Mountains police academy in Phoenix, and on night shifts he got rides in the various districts. He drank up the folklore of the force and came home bursting with it. He acknowledged Dianne with a dip and a wave across the tables, and carried straight on before she'd even had a chance to respond.

"The kids north of Central all drive pickups," he was saying.

"They got taste," Earl Ellis said smugly. He was next to Avery, and on the other side his arm was loosely draped over the shoulders of Earl's Girl. They came and went so fast, there was never any time to remember their names; faces changed like a flicker-book, but Earl's Girl served as a tag for them all. This one chewed bubble gum and wore a baseball cap.

"Now," Vince Avery went on, "the Chicano kids who live *south* of Central go the other way ... they've got custom sedans fitted as lowriders, and they add these hydraulic jacks and then juice 'em up so they can make the cars hop right off the ground like a bunny. The trouble is, you've got to have a row of auxiliary batteries in the trunk to give you the power, so we're always getting callouts to the dealers on Van Buren and Camelback because they turn up in the morning to find they've a yard full of dead cars with no cells."

Jo Spencer came over with her pad, and Dianne ordered a Coke. Neal Embry said, "Is that how they caught the cop killer?"

"That's how. Somebody spotted his pal waiting in the car for him to come out of the yard. This time the officer waited for backup before he moved in. Sergeant Volchak — that's the guy I've been riding with — went into the yard and the kid came at him with a knife. Alex nearly blew his leg off, and then when they did a check on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

blade it turned out to be the one we'd been looking for."

"Why just the leg?" Earl said. "Why didn't he blow him away?"

"He was trying to. A situation like that, you hit 'em wherever you can."

"But then you can't go over and finish them off?"

"No," Avery said, "that's not encouraged."

Earl shook his head, as if in sorrow at the way the world tended to overcomplicate the obvious. One of the Altenheim girls said, "What are they going to do with him?"

"He's under guard at the County Hospital until they can move him to the jail. They already operated twice to save his leg. They say the chief's mad because having him turn up in court on crutches will help his defense."

Dianne's Coke arrived just as she saw that Bobbie was on her way back over. She pulled her chair aside to make room. Neal Embry said, "Hey, Vince, tell 'em about the fruit loop."

They were far out enough on the fringe of the group for them to be able to turn away without seeming rude. Bobbie said, "I'm glad to see you could drag yourself out."

"Being called an old maid-in-the-making didn't leave me much of a choice."

"Well, it got you here, didn't it?" Bobbie reached over for her glass. Her hair was tied back, and she was wearing a cowgirl shirt and stretch jeans. She looked about sixteen, although she was three years older.

"I can only stay for an hour," Dianne said. "Dad might need the car later, and I'll have to see to the desk."

"Are you telling me you can't even take an evening out without punching a clock? Come on."

"There's nobody else to do it. I don't mind."

"And what's with this car business. I thought you were getting one of your own."

"I checked with Big Jim, but...." Dianne realized with horror that the gates were opening and a high roller of despair was about to come through. She tried to turn away and to make it look casual. "We can't manage it right now," she finished lamely, but her voice sounded as if it were coming from more than a mile away.

"Hey," Bobbie said with real concern, "what did I say?"

"Nothing."

"You asked if you could have your own car and he hit the roof, is that it?"

Dianne shook her head. "That's just a little part of it, it's really nothing."

Vince Avery was still talking about the fruit loop, the circuit of streets east of downtown Phoenix where homosexuals cruised through the night and into the morning. Bobbie looked around quickly, and then drew Dianne across to the nearest empty booth. Jo Spencer glanced over to see if they'd decided to eat; Bobbie shook her head.

"So, come on," she said to Dianne.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dianne thought for a moment, then took a breath and launched in.

"It's like I've got locked into something that I'm never going to be able to shake off," she said. "I watched all my friends go away to college and I thought, it s O.K., I can take my time deciding what I want to do. But then some of them came back, and I thought maybe I'd changed too much to know them again. But the truth was that they'd changed and I hadn't."

"You got good grades. You could have gone to college."

"Dad needed me around the motel. He wanted me to put it off for a couple of years." Dianne smiled wanly. "I missed the bus."

"You've got a Cinderella complex," Bobbie said firmly. "You need a good shakeup. Why don't you run away?"

"I don't know. It would be selfish. Besides, you've got to have somewhere to run to."

There was a burst of laughter from the other side of the booth curtain. Bobbie said, "What you mean is, the idea of it scarces you. Let's go to California."

This was a surprise. Dianne said, "Why California?"

"We've got family there. My Uncle Norbert's got a summer apartment in Santa Barbara." (She rolled her eyes expressively, hinting that Uncle Norbert was either too rich to be true or else a family joke). "He says I can take it over any time I like, for as long as I like. We could get jobs and share expenses."

"It's a nice idea, but...."

"I haven't just made this up," Bobbie insisted. "I've been thinking about it for some time, but ... I didn't want to do it alone."

Dianne stared at her Coke. The ice had melted, and there was mist up the outside of the glass. "I don't know," she said.

"You'll never shake this Cinderella business if you don't make a move. You've got to get out and kiss a few frogs."

Dianne promised to think it over, and then made her own trip to the rest rooms. A check in the mirror showed that she had no damage to repair.

On the way back, she almost bumped in Vince Avery; he was taking one of the pitchers over for a refill. He said, "You're Dianne Raines, aren't you?"

"That's me. What's it like, being a Blue Knight?" She knew it sounded corny, but it was the first thing she could think of.

"Right now I'm more like a Boy Scout with a badge. You used to go about with Bob Del Vecchio, didn't you?"

"That was five years ago."

"Him and my big brother were kind of close. I used to follow them around."

"I remember," Dianne said. Don Avery had been killed when his car collided with a slow-moving dumper truck more than two years before. Vince didn't seem to have changed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

much from being his tagalong little brother; the idea of him in uniform and carrying a gun somehow didn't seem right.

He said, "I was kind of snotnose in those days. Do you still hear from Bob?"

"Not anymore."

"I heard he was a teacher in Providence. It's hard to imagine."

"Probably just as hard for him to imagine you as a cop."

"I never thought of it that way," Vince admitted. "Listen, you kow how I'm due to pass out from the Academy at the end of next week?"

"I didn't know it was so close."

"The fifteenth." He gestured around the room with the empty pitcher. "I'm coming home on the Friday and we're taking this place over for a little party. Will you be coming?"

"Depends if I'm asked."

"I'm asking."

"O.K., I'm coming."

"That's great. And if you've any girlfriends at a loose end, drag 'em along, too. You know how Spencer doesn't like to see guys dancing together."

He flashed her a good-bye grin, and went on to the bar.

Dianne arrived home a little after nine. She went in through the office; it was empty, but Big Jim had propped open the connecting door to the sitting room so that he could watch TV and listen out for any late arrivals. This tended to be the start of the hour for the U-haul and panel truck market.

"I'm back, if you want to be going," Dianne called ahead, raising her voice to reach over a squeal of tires from the set. She came into the sitting room and saw Big Jim slumped in a low chair before the TV. There was a copy of the *Daily Miner* lying on the floor where he'd let it fall.

(He has trouble with his heart, the doctor gave him pills.)

Big Jim didn't take his eyes from the screen. "I changed my mind," he said.

Dianne waited for a moment. Big Jim had let the darkness fall around him, and there was only the light from a table lamp that had been within easy reach. For as far back as she could remember he'd seemed craggy and old, toughened by time rather than mellowed by it, but now she was reading all those same lines and seeing only a process of slow destruction.

Trying her best to sound casual, she said, "What's happening with the books?"

Tension came into the room like a leopard. "Nothing's happening," Big Jim said. "I'm getting them in shape early for the end of the year, that's all."

"You want me to help?"

"No." There was a silence. The car chase ended in a smash, followed by a station logo, followed by a Polaroid commercial. Big Jim added, "I called Renetta while you were out. She's going to come down for a couple of days.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and help me get everything straight."

Aunt Ren was Big Jim's sister. She worked at the Frontier in Las Vegas, and she'd helped them a lot with their move to Arizona all those years before — so far back, from Dianne's point of view, that she'd never been able to understand or appreciate exactly what form that help had taken, but then Dianne had her own debt to Aunt Ren. After her mother had died on the I-40 not fifty yards from the motel, it was Renetta who'd come to stay and to help them through.

But still she couldn't let it go. She said, carefully, "Is it anything to do with the man from the motel people?"

Big Jim looked at her sharply. "What's he been saying to you?"

"Nothing. But Viola said...."

"Viola doesn't know what she's talking about. He doesn't work for any motel chain. He's just a smartass with too much mouth. He's nobody and I don't want you talking to him. Understand?"

"You don't have to yell at me."

"This is important, Dianne. If he tries to speak to you, you look the other way."

"But what did he *do?*" *And if he stepped so far out of line, how come he's still here?*

"He didn't *do* anything, but he could talk his way through one side of a tennis racket and out the other. He's so smooth, you'd think he'd been greased. I don't want my girl listening to that kind of slick stuff."

He turned away again to close off the argument. Dianne decided that she'd pushed it far enough.

She said, "Should I make up the annex for Aunt Ren?"

"When you've got time. She won't be here for a few days yet."

"I've got time. It's still quiet."

Big Jim sighed heavily. "Don't I know it," he said, and then he seemed to hesitate before going on. "I made a decision. I'm letting Viola go."

The commercials ended, followed by a setting-up shot of police vehicles in a precinct yard. Dianne said, "When?"

"I'll tell her tomorrow. We just don't have the turnover to keep her on."

"What'll we do if things pick up?"

"Then we can bring her back, or else hire someone else. It's only a temporary thing. I'll increase your allowance, and at the end of the year we'll take a look at the books and see about that car you've been after." He looked at her again. "O.K.?"

But this clumsy attempt at diplomacy had barely come through to her. She could only say, "Sure," and then leave him to wait for the next big chase, the next commercial break.

She lay on her bed and tried to read, but she couldn't concentrate on the magazine. She thought about California, and wondered how seriously she ought to take Bobbie Elrod's proposal. Appealing though it was, the whole idea had a faint touch of doom

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about it. Meanwhile, Viola's leaving seemed to be a significant confirmation of her imprisonment, the helping-out habit finally turned into a bond of obligation.

Dianne Raines, housekeeper, make-weight at parties with a shortfall of girls. She Missed The Bus.

If there was any further exchange between the stranger and Big Jim, it happened when Dianne wasn't around. Viola worked through to the end of the week and came by on Monday to collect her last wages. She didn't wave or even look Dianne's way, just went straight into the office whilst her son waited outside in his half-restored Thunderbird. She wasn't inside for more than two minutes.

Dianne was being kept busy. Thirty of the motel's sixty units were occupied on a one-night basis by cowboys on their way home from the weekend's rodeo at Wickenburg. The number of their shiny pickup trucks had diminished by about half during the morning — one of them had a custom job that would have had Earl Ellis drooling with envy — and a couple more were pulling out as she went down to start on the lower level.

She'd bundled the sheets and towels together and dropped them off the balcony onto the ersatz grass by the pool. Big Jim didn't like her doing this, but it was a time-saving trick she'd learned from Viola. Viola had always maintained that she could only take the stairs one at a time and with one hand on the rail, although there was the memorable occasion when a weirdo in 54 had exposed himself in the balcony window, and Viola had hitched up her skirts and beaten the record covering the distance to the office.

Some of the cowboys traveled alone, and some of those who traveled alone were rodeo competitors rather than just spectators. They still had parking authorization tickets stuck inside their windshields, and vinyl tags and souvenirs from state fairs and little townships and places she'd never heard of. She watched a white Blazer pulling out onto the interstate and she wished herself with it. At the same time, she recognized that the wish was flimsy; she felt like a bedridden child who read *Treasure Island* and longed for a life at sea.

The lower level of the court smelled of sunbaked asphalt and of exhaust fumes that were slow to clear. Some of the rooms still had their curtains drawn, and she could hear the TV sets inside. One was tuned to the local Gospel channel, but the rest were either "Sesame Street" or game shows. She wasn't worried about being held up. Cowboys were O.K.; they didn't make much noise and they didn't mess up their rooms. The worst problem they'd had in recent weeks had been a group of kids in town for some school reunion, when they'd taken the screens down and started a noisy open-win-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dow party. Big Jim had gone over and stopped it, his overpowering presence turning them all back into ten-year-olds again, scrambling to hide their beers and to flush their grass down the toilet. Dianne could remember a time when she'd believed that there was nothing that could scare Big Jim, but then Anne Raines had stormed out after an argument and taken the car straight into the path of a big Reo. The driver of the truck had been killed; and in the words of one of the patrolmen that Dianne knew she wasn't supposed to have heard, her mother had been *put through the blender.*

Dianne looked through her check-out list. The next room along was that of the stranger, and his car wasn't there. After the way Big Jim had been talking, her name for him no longer seemed to fit; he'd become something smoother and darker and, in some unpleasant way, more fascinating.

And he'd gone.

The room was listed for a full make-over. She pushed her trolley in by the door and knocked, just to be sure. There was no reply, and so she opened the door on her master key and went inside.

The curtains were drawn, and she pulled them apart a foot or so. He'd definitely gone, she saw as she turned back to face the room from the window. It was so neat that it almost looked unused. It hadn't been so different yesterday or the day before, when she'd had little to do other than switch over the towels and the glasses in the bathroom and give the bedcovers a tug to prove she'd been by, but now his bedside alarm was missing and there was no hide suitcase on the folding stand.

There was a drip in the shower, and she went through and turned it off. The towels were damp, but they'd been folded. Next to the basin and pinned under one of the disposable glasses were a dollar tip and some kind of pamphlet. She turned it over; the glass had left a damp ring on the cover but she could read the title: *The Awakening Land.* The cover showed what appeared to be a giant reaching toward the clouds, and there was lightning forking down through his outstretched hand. The image was undercut a little by the fact that the giant was wearing an open-necked shirt and slacks, but his expression was grim and without pity. She flicked open the first page and looked at the contents list: *Evolution — the dangerous lie, How the Lawmakers are Failing You, The Judgment for Willful Sin....*

Well, perhaps it explained something about Big Jim's extreme reaction to the stranger. This was something she hadn't expected, but when she thought about it she wasn't surprised, either. She pushed the dollar tip into the pocket of her coverall, dropped the pamphlet into the trash, and took the bag from the wastebin out to her trolley.

For somebody who spent her days

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

counting other people's money, Renetta was admirably well balanced; she always said that all of the family's share of temper had been channeled into her brother. Big Jim told her, when she arrived on the Thursday evening, that they'd been able to hear the leaky muffler of her old Triumph sports all the way down from Grasshopper Junction. Dianne's feeling was that, pleased as he was to see her, he seemed even more relieved.

Dianne carried Aunt Ren's overnight bag through to the annex. This was actually the motel unit that was on the end of the ground-floor row and which shared a wall with their apartment, and it had a walk-through double door which allowed them to use it as extra living space.

Renetta sat on the bed to test its bounce, even though she'd slept in it often enough over the past few years. She said, "How've you been keeping, Dianne?"

"I'm fine," Dianne said, and she put the overnight bag down on the floor by the dressing table.

"And what kind of trouble has Big Jim managed to get himself into this time?"

Dianne could see from the dressing-table mirror that Renetta wasn't making a joke; tired after her drive, she was simply asking the score. Dianne said, "He says he wants to straighten the books before the end of the year."

"We both know him better than that. What's the *real* reason?"

"Well...." Dianne looked toward the open walk-through, but even as she did this Renetta stretched out and gave the door a push. It whispered across the carpet and came to rest almost closed. Dianne went on, "He's never talked about it, but I know he keeps two registers. One's for the regular business and the other's for just now and again. It comes out sometimes for tourists or anybody who looks like they won't need a real receipt."

Renetta was nodding, as if she'd heard it all before. "Cash in advance?" she said.

"To keep it untraceable. But he never overdoes it, never more than two or three times a month."

"But now it's catching up with him."

"Someone was with him the day that he called you. I think he'd seen through what was going on, and Dad got scared." Dianne didn't add that he'd probably been threatened with the Judgment for Willful Sin as part of the bargain. Getting found out was bad enough, but being lectured by one of what Big Jim had always called the outstretched-palm-and-diamond-rings brigade must really have sent his blood pressure popping.

Renetta was thinking it over. "It could be the best thing to happen to him," she said. "Better some stranger getting offended than the IRS or the franchisers. Does anyone else know about this?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Only Viola, and he's let her go."

Renetta looked at Dianne in surprise. "You mean, you're on your own?"

"We're not so busy. I can manage."

"That's not the point."

"Honestly, Aunt Ren, I don't mind."

But Renetta was still looking at her, and looking hard. After a moment, Dianne had to turn her head away.

"Like hell you don't," Renetta said. "What is it, really, Din?"

It had been her mother's name for her. It was the only lever needed, and Dianne opened right up. Renetta led her over to sit on the bed and then sat beside her, an arm around her shoulders.

"I feel guilty for just thinking it," Dianne tried to explain after a minute, "but I can see myself as a housekeeper for the rest of my life, and he doesn't even *care*."

"Oh, he cares about you, all right," Renetta reassured her. They were both keeping their voices low, by unstated agreement. "But imagination was never one of Big Jim's strong points. How old are you now?"

"Nearly twenty-three."

"Well, pardon my lack of sympathy, but twenty-three isn't exactly over the hill and beyond salvation."

"But it's the way things are set up. They don't leave room for anything *I* want to do."

"And what *do* you want to do?"

Renetta waited, but Dianne could only shrug. Renetta went on, "Well, there's a big piece of your problem right there. You can't just drift and then complain about wherever you wind up. You're at a good time to do some hard thinking about your life — young enough to aim high but not so young you'll make a fool of yourself doing it." She gave Dianne's shoulder a squeeze. "I'll talk to Big Jim."

"Don't tell him I was complaining," Dianne said hurriedly.

"I won't tell him anything of the kind. I'll just find some tactful way of saying he's not doing the best by his girl. That should get fast results."

The idea of having Renetta on her side didn't reassure Dianne as much as she felt it should. For the rest of the evening and through breakfast the next morning, she waited, tensed for the explosion that she knew was going to come. But it didn't, at least not yet; and when Renetta set herself down in the office to wade through last year's ledger entries and receipts, Dianne started to unwind a little. Obviously business came first, and her own case would be argued out later.

Motel morning. The early checkouts gone, one or two still sleeping in, a radio playing loud somewhere. Dianne pushed her trolley along to the first of the listed units and opened up. Big Jim was working somewhere below, replacing cracked tile in one of the bathrooms. From what she'd heard late

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

last night, he wasn't exactly going to get the help from Renetta that he'd wanted; Aunt Ren had insisted that there was no way to make the books watertight without making them one hundred percent honest.

Throw out the towels, strip off the sheets. When she brought them out to drop them from the balcony, Bobbie Elrod was waiting.

"Hi," she said. "Thought I'd call around and see how you spend your time." She was leaning back on the balcony rail and twirling her sunglasses by one wire arm. She was wearing cycle shorts and a blouse knotted in front to bare her suntanned skin. It was obvious that she'd never had the problem of Minnesota skin.

Dianne felt immediately uncomfortable in her nylon coverall. "There's not much to see," she said.

"I'm free for an hour. Can I give you a hand?"

"Thanks, but I kind of work to a system."

Bobbie followed her back into the unit, looking around. "I know what you mean," she said. "Whenever we've stayed in a motel I've straightened the room in the morning, but it never looks as good as when the maid service does it. Anyway, I really came about tonight. Do you want me to call for you?"

"That's O.K.," Dianne said as she went into the bathroom and switched on the lights. "I've fixed up to borrow Aunt Ren's car."

"The sports with the soft top?" Bobbie said, coming into the doorway and leaning against the frame.

"That's the one."

"Dyna*mite*. If Earl gets a sight of that...."

"Oh, no," Dianne said quickly. "No loan-outs, and no racing."

She worked as fast as she could, but being watched made her uncomfortable. Three rooms later, Bobbie said, "You do this all day?"

"Not all day. About eleven I go down to the laundry room and start the linen. Afternoons I go around and clear up after the late sleepers. I'm usually finished by four."

"I suppose it's a job. What does your dad pay you?"

"It doesn't work like that. We have an arrangement."

"What do you mean, an allowance? You don't get paid?"

"I get an allowance."

"Little kids get allowances, Dianne."

There was something in Bobbie's voice that put Dianne instantly on guard. "Just leave it, Bobbie," she said, "O.K.?"

They went down into the tar-scented sauna of the lower level. The concrete walks were darkened and streaked by the runoff from the border sprinklers. When Dianne came out of the laundry room, Bobbie was crouching by the pool and trailing her fingers languidly through the water. It looked as green and unreal as a deep slab of Jell-O.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It must be great to have your own pool," Bobbie said.

"It's for the guests."

"My dad's thinking about building us one for next summer. There's an empty lot backs onto our land, and he said he might make an offer. It'll be really neat."

Neat? Dianne thought. *So what happened to California, all of a sudden?* Bobbie was gathering up slow handfuls of water, flicking them like soft diamonds out across the ripples. *Step carefully, Dianne.* Bobbie looked up from the water and smiled.

The day just seemed to drag itself out, and it was nearly six when she finished. She could hear that Renetta and Big Jim were in the sitting room. Dianne went into the kitchen and made coffee and sandwiches for all of them, and when she took the tray through she couldn't help noticing that the conversation abruptly turned to trivia. Renetta was calm, but Big Jim seemed to be embarrassed. Dianne withdrew to the kitchen to let them get on with it. She sat on a barstool and listened for the scraps that drifted along the hallway and through the open door. Most of it was Big Jim.

"He walked in here and he closed the door behind him, and then he starts giving me some line about being from head office in Wilmington, some kind of traveling inspector. Said he's seen through the system I was running and he was thinking over exactly what he was going to do about it ... I could see right off that the idea was to let me sweat for a while. He made it sound so good, listin' off all those old cases he'd uncovered, made it sound like it was a tossup between losin' the franchise or going to jail. But then when he'd gone and I thought it over, he'd got nothing *... and he hadn't shown me no card, no ID, and I started to think, now, wait a minute. What if he's just tryin' to test my heat factor? Just puttin' the pressure on to see if I'll jump? So the first thing I did, I ran over to Stehle's and asked Mary to call head office and pretend she had an urgent message and she needed to contact this guy. And you know what?"*

(Something inaudible from Renetta.)

"Damn right they'd never heard of him! So when he came back I faced him with it, and he didn't turn a hair. Asked me what difference it made. I coulda murdered him, if it wasn't for that he still had the Mickey Mouse paper work I'd given him."

(Something more from Renetta, but still inaudible.)

"I don't want any lectures, Ren. I just want to get the books so watertight that no smooth-faced kid with a Bible where his brain ought to be can try pushing me over...."

Dianne came back to the ground with a start. Last night she'd dreamed of a giant reaching out for the lightning of heaven, but there had been an empty pit where his face ought to be. It was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

strange that she should have slept so badly, but that she could only remember it now.

As for the rest, Big Jim was performing more or less as expected. What irritated him was not so much being found out, as being put on the spot by some outsider. Exposure was one thing, but he'd been made to feel like a fool.

Dianne pushed the uneaten half of her sandwich away. She didn't have much of an appetite, and she was feeling sticky and uncomfortable, the result of moving betweeen air-cooled rooms and hot sunshine throughout the day. What made it worse was the vision that she was getting of herself a few years on, as fat and flat-footed as Viola Page, sitting in the shade by the pool and fanning herself with a brochure on the same faded green.

She took her sandwich plate, covered it with Saran Wrap, and put it in the refrigerator. Then she went to dig out her swimsuit.

It was a blue one-piece, and she hadn't worn it in more than a year. When she shook it out she got the old, dead scent of chlorine. She stripped and put it on, and then she got a towel from the bathroom and went out by the front desk. Darkness was still a ways off, but there would be shadows in the motel court, so she switched on the pool lights as she went.

She barely paused on the edge before she dived in. The water was clean and cool, stripping all of her problems away. She swam in a noisy crawl for two or three lengths and then stopped with her cheek against the cool tiles, feeling the contrast between the water and the warm air.

Things were starting to look clearer. She'd drifted enough. Renetta would lay the groundwork and she'd take it from there.

She pushed under and around, and struck out back for the shadows. The pool wasn't big, but still her father said that it cost too much to run when nobody ever used it, and he generally shut down the filters and put the covers over in the winter. She ought to get out here more. Turn around in the shadows, head down and kick slowly back toward the deep end. A couple of dead leaves from one of the border trees bobbed by, and Dianne took a swipe at them and missed. She'd swim for a while longer, and then she'd shower and get herself ready for Vince Avery's celebration.

She came up and grabbed the edge again, leaving her legs to float free. There was a car turning into the motel court. It came off the I-40 and through the furthest entrance, crossing the lot in a kind of sideways-slewing motion. It made an exaggerated swerve to avoid hitting a yellow Pinto, aimed for a parking slot and braked too late. One tire rode over onto the planted border before the units and narrowly missed a balcony support pillar. The car rocked to a halt, and the engine died.

Dianne pulled herself halfway out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the water, but then she hesitated. The car was a powder blue Oldsmobile. There was damage on one side, the driver's side. The scene stayed frozen as a tableau for a moment: the damaged car ticking under the court lights, Dianne half in and half out of the lime green water, the eternal background rumble of the interstate a world away. Then she hauled herself out and padded, dripping, around the warm concrete way for a closer look.

The driver's door had been pushed in by an angled collision with another car. It looked as if it had been rammed, and Dianne could make out the shape of a headlamp clearly printed into the center of the damage. The side window was still in one piece, and behind it the driver was leaning against his selt belt, head hanging.

She recognized him easily. He'd been the Georgia tie salesman, he'd become something far less innocuous ... but now he was simply hurt. Dianne glanced back toward the office, but there was no activity; the arrival, although messy, had been carried off in silence.

She tried the door, but it was jammed. The stranger raised his head groggily, but he didn't help. Dianne went around the other side and tried the passenger door; now the stranger was plucking at his belt catch and trying to get it undone. The door opened easily, the belt came free; Dianne felt the chill of the car's air conditioning against her wet skin.

There was an attaché case on the passenger seat. She moved it out of the way. She almost dropped it because the catches weren't secured, but then she set it on the ground and reached in to help the stranger crawl across and out.

He got both feet on the ground clutching his side and listing like a holed boat. Dianne said, "How bad are you hurt?"

"I'll be all right," he said. He couldn't manage much more than a whisper. "Help me get inside."

"I'll get you a doctor."

"I don't want a doctor, I want a room!"

"You're not very high on my daddy's list after the trick you pulled on him."

"That I can handle." He was having to lean heavily on the side of the car. "First I need to lie down for a while."

She left him there and went back to the office. He had a nerve, you had to admit that; Big Jim would go through the roof if he knew. Dianne's first impulse was to go through to her father and tell him, but the more she thought about it, the less attractive the idea became. It would be a lot simpler and quieter, she thought as she lifted her passkey from its hook, to let the stranger rest over and then get him out of the way in the morning. She could straighten the room and no one need ever know.

Big Jim heard her in the office. "That you, Dianne?" he called.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Just switching off the lights to the pool," she told him, and then she slipped out again.

She opened up one of the empty units, the one that was furthest from the office and their apartment. The stranger had picked up his attaché case and resecured the catches, and he was hugging it across his chest as if to keep his insides from falling out. He flinched away when Dianne offered to take it, but he accepted her help in getting to the unit.

"I really ought to get you a doctor," she said. Her body was printing wet onto his light gray suit.

"Say that once more," he warned, "and your daddy can wave good-bye to his business."

He pulled away from her as they came through the door, and he made directly for the bed. It was a queen-sized, with a Magic Fingers coin box on the bedside table. Dianne said, "Who *are* you?"

"Just a traveler passing through...." he lowered himself full-length, his relief obvious. "Got a little banged up on the job."

"Do the police know about it?"

"Every little detail. Turn on the TV before you go."

"Which channel?"

"Anything with news." She switched on the TV and dialed through until she reached CBS. The stranger was still holding his attaché case, but he'd let it slip a little; it uncovered a bloody patch on his shirt.

As if he were reading her thoughts, he said, "Don't get any ideas about calling a doctor anyway. I'll know if you do."

"It could be worse than you think."

"It's nothing that won't heal." He waved a dismissive hand, his eyes already closed. "Run along now," he said. "Go count your towels or something."

Earl Ellis and the current version of Earl's Girl were coming out of the Moon Pool as Dianne entered. There was some loud music and a healthy-sounding level of conversation seeping out through the doors behind them. Dianne said, "You leaving early?"

"We're going to cruise for an hour and then maybe we'll call back," Earl said, and then he made a face. "Vince is still doing a recap on his memoirs."

Earl's Girl giggled as they went on into the lot. This one had dark hair in two long braids and a T-shirt with a GO HIKE THE CANYON logo. Dianne headed toward the main room, past Spencer's SORRY — PRIVATE PARTY TONIGHT sign. Somebody had taken a felt pen and made the two O's into smiley buttons.

The noise hit her redoubled as she stepped through. The lights had been colored with crepe, and there was a hired disco setup at the far end of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

room. Over a sea of heads, Dianne saw Vince Avery's parents at the bar. Carter Avery had his usual lick of hair combed across his bald patch, and his wife had a glassy Nancy Reagan smile that suggested at least half of her was somewhere else. She couldn't see Vince. Older relatives had set up a defensive stockade around a booth table, but no such wise withdrawal was possible for the Averys; Carter was listening to Paul Mesco telling a joke, and he was so eager to show that he was finding it funny that his head was sticking forward out of his jacket and nodding up and down like a turtle's.

Dianne slid through the crowd, and almost immediately bumped into Lloyd Garret. He was seventeen years old, wearing a sports coat borrowed from his father and wandering around with nobody particular to talk to and doing his best not to show it.

"Have you seen Bobbie around?" she said, but Lloyd looked blank. Dianne leaned closer and tried again, almost yelling to be heard over the music.

"I saw her dancing," Lloyd told her at the same kind of strain level. "She was with Dean Childers, but that was awhile ago."

Dianne gave him a see-you-later wave, and moved on.

She picked up a glass of fruit punch, and then found Vince Avery holding court in one of the quieter alcoves by the kitchen. *So Alex went into the yard and the kid came at him with a knife,* he was saying; Dianne scanned the group, but there was no sign of Bobbie.

Vince was wearing his uniform, with a light jacket thrown over his shoulders as a token. It looked fresh out of the box. So did Vince, with his new haircut and his cheeks pinked with pride. Dianne sat by one of the Altenheim girls and said, "Is this about the boy who killed the policeman?"

The Altenheim girl (Dianne was never sure which one she was talking to) nodded. "Somebody got to him in the hospital."

Dianne glanced around. "Have you seen Bobbie?"

But the Altenheim girl shook her head, and so Dianne sipped at her punch and scanned the dance floor as she listened with half her attention.

"This morning," Vince Avery was saying, "he's scheduled for his last operation. He's all prepped and on the gurney. There's no chance he's going anywhere, but we've got a man up in the operating room and another in the corridor outside, and Alex has pulled the job of walking with the gurney along the way. Everything seems fine until they actually get to the operating room, and then when they pull the sheet back and roll him over they find some guy they've never seen before."

"Who?" Neal Embry said, because someone was expected to.

"Somebody from the same floor, a guy who'd had his gall bladder out already. He was flat out and snoring and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nobody could work out where the switch had been made. Alex radioed for backup and got people on all the exits. The assumption was that his brothers or the guys he ran with would be trying to sneak him away, but an hour went by and there was no sign. So then they started a floor-by-floor of the hospital."

"And found him dead," Neal Embry said, which wasn't in the script.

"Who's telling this?"

"Sorry, Vince."

"He wasn't dead when they found him. This is the part that hasn't been released. They've got these crummy old floor tiles in the County, and they've been closing down wings and replacing them. Alex gets himself into this inside corridor where they've cut the power, and he's finding his way by his flashlight. Suddenly he trips over something that feels like a heap of wet rubber, but when he comes up there's blood all over the flash. He gets it clean and there's a trail leading from all this messy stuff into an empty side ward, and as he's following it he hears someone groaning."

"What was the stuff?" the Altenheim girl next to Dianne asked.

"Skin." Vince paused, waiting for it to register. "The Salazar boy's lying there on the gurney without an inch of skin on him. Even his eyelids were gone, Alex said. He got a couple of doctors along, but they couldn't do any more than just stand there and watch him die. It took another five minutes."

There was silence all around the table. "Jesus, Vince," someone said, but the story wasn't over.

"The really weird part," Vince went on, "is what they found stuck in Salazar's hand." Another pause, for effect.

"Well?"

"It was a pamphlet. One of these religious tracts, real thunder-from-the-mountains stuff. They're trying to clean it off and trace it. The only lead so far is some guy whose car was run into in the parking lot around the time that the search was starting. It wasn't his fault, but he still didn't stop."

"Maybe it was the avenging angel," one of the Altenheim girls suggested.

"Naw," Neal Embry said. "Angels always stop and show their insurance."

"Excuse me," Dianne said with a weak smile, and she set her fruit punch down and headed for the door.

If she'd stayed around for a while in the parking lot, Dianne might have overheard Bobbie Elrod telling Dean Childers about her Uncle Norbert's apartment in Santa Barbara, and how they could both get jobs and share expenses. But instead she got into Renetta's Triumph and set out for home as fast as she dared.

Half a mile down the road she saw a telephone booth on a coffee shop forecourt. She slowed, but she didn't stop. The situation wasn't so simple; the stranger had his claws into Big Jim in a way that she didn't fully understand, and she couldn't ignore this. In-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stead she kept thinking about Mr. Wilson, the assistant manager at their bank. He had a little printed card on the wall over his desk that said WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?

Well, whatever the answer to that might be, Dianne couldn't imagine either Jesus or Mr. Wilson hounding down a teenaged boy and stripping him live like a baby seal. But it seemed that the stranger prayed to a darker god, and between them they'd worked out their version of The Judgment for Willful Sin. Her first instinct was to put it all on Big Jim's shoulders, but she couldn't shake the image of him looking broken and old in the office doorway.

And she *might* still be wrong ... it was a slim hope, but she hung onto it.

The NO VACANCY neon was lit when she got back, which meant that the office had been locked and left unattended for some reason. She let herself in with her key and went straight to the current stack of registration cards. Big Jim only cleared them once a month, and she soon found the one that she needed.

He'd given his name as James Faville. It was probably false, which would fit in with why he'd paid cash and not by credit card. His handwriting was neat and slightly girlish. The box for his car's registration was blank.

Dianne stared at the card, trying to think it through. If he couldn't use credit, then he probably hadn't been able to hire a car. The blue Oldsmobile might be traceable — a gift or a loan, since nutty fringe cults never seemed to have any problem getting financial support. All she needed to do would be to make a note of the number and then give the police an anonymous call, and if she waited around in the morning she could even tell them the way he'd be heading. Out on the desert freeway, he'd be trapped as effectively as a rat in a pipe.

There was a noise from the apartment. Somebody was moving through toward the office.

Dianne quickly stuffed the card back in with the others and closed the drawer. Renetta appeared in the doorway. She looked tired, but she was smiling.

"You're early," she said.

"It was too noisy for me," Dianne said, hoping that her nerves wouldn't show. "I only stayed long enough to be polite."

"Well, as long as you're around, do you think you could keep your eye on the front desk while I attend to Big Jim?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, he's just been overcelebrating." Renetta glanced over her shoulder, and lowered the volume a notch. "If you want the truth, he's drunk himself sick."

"But why?"

"Nothing bad. Just relief. I finally managed to convince him to keep one set of straight books. We both know what I'm talking about."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I guess so."

Renetta put her hand on Dianne's arm and squeezed it, a little too hard. It seemed that Big Jim hadn't been celebrating alone. "It's going to be all right, Din," she said firmly. "I'll talk to you later."

Renetta went back into the apartment. She caught the frame with her hip on the way through and rebounded like a pinball, but otherwise she didn't seem to notice.

Dianne went through Big Jim's coffee can full of ballpoints and finally found one that worked. Then she took a scrap of paper and went out through the covered way and into the motel court.

The Olds hadn't been moved. It was still at the far end of the court with one wheel hooked over into the border. She'd have to go out and around to read the plate.

The motel at night had always spooked her when she was little, but she'd thought that she was over it ... until now. It was an area too big to be lit properly on the available budget. There were weak courtesy lights over the lower walkway and along the upper gallery, but the bushes screened these from the parking area. Three angled spotlights covered the cars, but they created as many shadows as they killed.

Dianne made it across as quietly as she could manage, but she had to crouch in full view as she copied down the number. She glanced around as she folded the paper and stowed it in her pocket; although she tried her best not to look furtive, it didn't feel as if she were succeeding.

Someone moved past the Coke machine in the covered way. She didn't see who, just the momentary interruption of the front-panel glow as he passed before it.

Whoever it was, Dianne waited for him to come back.

Nobody came.

But there wasn't anything to worry about, because the man who called himself Faville was lying in his room probably too bruised even to lever himself off the bed before morning. She looked over toward the unit to reassure herself.

And saw that his door was open.

It was all too plain. He'd set out, perhaps to get himself some ice to wrap in a towel to make a compress. He hadn't closed the door because she'd left him no key. He'd seen her coming, seen all the Nancy Drew business about his registration, and now he was waiting for her.

She thought of the Salazar boy stirring weakly on a hospital gurney, all gristle and blood, unable even to close his eyes. She'd let herself come too far from the office, and no matter how carefully she sneaked back, there would still be the final bottleneck of the covered way.

Like a rat in a pipe....

There was one other option. She dived through the bushes and ran for the open room.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The slap of her footsteps echoed down the walkway. Dianne paused long enough to look inside and be sure that she wasn't making the worst possible mistake, but at the sight of the empty bed with its rumpled covers she turned and slammed the door behind her. Then she added the security lock and the chain.

The TV was still on, but the volume had been turned low. There was only one light in the room, the reading lamp over the bed. Dianne went to the telephone and picked it up. It would ring out on the office switchboard, but now she had to hope that Renetta would eventually hear and respond to the muted buzzer.

The stranger's attaché case was on the table by the phone. The catches were open, but the lid was down. A brief chord of angry horns sounded on the distant I-40, and Dianne glanced nervously toward the door. It looked expensive and solid, but it was hardly more than veneer over a filling of cheap stuff.

The ringout tone kept coming back down the line. As delicately as she could, Dianne lifted the attaché case lid with her free hand. There, on a bed of bloody towels, lay the ugliest-looking knife she'd ever seen.

"Isn't it a little late for maid service?" the stranger said softly by her ear.

He took the phone away from her and hung up, and then he closed the case. He was wearing a new-looking shirt that he hadn't even finished buttoning yet. Behind him, the bathroom door was open.

He said, "I'm interested to hear what kind of explanation you can invent."

Dianne tried once, and on the second attempt found her voice. "Is there any point?"

He shrugged. "Not really. And I was leaving anyway."

"I thought you were sick."

"It didn't last." He looked at her for a moment and then smiled, slowly. It was like bad wood splitting.

She had to carry his hide suitcase as they walked across the lot to Renetta's Triumph. He stayed close behind her, with the point of the knife resting against the small of her back. He was still smiling, but she didn't feel encouraged; there was no real warmth in it, like the smile on an actor in an airline ad.

Dianne felt a surge of hope when she saw a station wagon pulling into the motel; it slowed as it coasted across the forecourt, and she could see the cutout shapes of the figures inside as it came under the lights. The stranger told her to freeze and she did, blinking and waiting, and then the station wagon was picking up speed again and coming around to return to the freeway.

She hadn't switched off the NO VACANCY sign.

He was going to make her go with him, there was no question about it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She was expecting that she'd have to drive, but he made her sit in the passenger seat with her hands in view on the dash while he practiced to get comfortable with the Triumph's manual shift.

As he ran through the gears, Dianne said, "What are you going to do with me?"

Second gear was giving him a problem. Renetta had always used it for starting out, and it was getting worn. He made it on the third try and said, "I haven't decided yet."

"You know they're looking for you."

"I'm covered." He started the engine. "I've got the right friends. You're my only problem."

He belted himself in and they drove out toward the west of the town, Dianne still with her hands on the dash. She'd thought that she might be able to wait for the chance to grab at the flensing knife while he was occupied, but he'd stuck it deep into the upholstery by his thigh. He could shift his weight and trap it there, or else have it to hand in less than a second. Besides, say she managed to get it ... what could she expect to do then?"

Ten minutes later they'd left the interstate and were heading north toward Santa Claus and Grasshopper Junction. The Triumph's needle hovered just under a legal fifty-five. The road ahead was like an arrow down the open valley with hardly any buildings in the next eighty miles; there was traffic, but it was sparse. No lights. The stranger flicked on the Triumph's beams and then returned his hand to rest easily by the handle of the knife.

Dianne said, "Are we going to Las Vegas?"

There was silence for a while, as if he hadn't heard her. Then he said, "You know, the whores print their own newspapers. They leave them on the street for anyone to pick up."

"Is ... is that your work?"

"It's God's work."

Dianne started to speak again, but three big trucks coming in the opposite direction drowned her out. *Get him to talk,* she thought, and when she could she said, "How long's all this been going on?"

"Forever."

She looked sideways then to see if he was being serious, but he was impossible to read. *Well,* she thought suddenly, *you wanted to get out of Kingman somehow,* but although she knew it ought to be funny, the irony burned her inside. The stranger was blank and composed, but his eyes seemed to glow with their own fire as he glanced in the rearview mirror. His face grew demonic in the reflected light, twisting out of shape and distorting until suddenly all the planes and angles in the car shifted. The world tilted dizzily, and the light show came screaming by on their left and swung in front, deafening them with a derisive blast from a five-note air horn. Dianne got a glimpse of Earl's Girl wide-eyed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and looking back in delight as the stranger floored the brake and Earl's pickup leapt away with its taillights blipping.

Dianne's first thought was of rescue, but Earl's pickup was already leaving them behind. He didn't know she was there — he was just getting his usual fun by cutting up other drivers, and a low sports job like the Triumph would be an obvious target.

The stranger changed down a gear and started to pick up speed.

Dianne gripped the dash. The canvas roof overhead snapped in the wind as they surged forward, and she wished she could at least have been belted in. The stranger switched off the Triumph's lights.

They dived on into the darkness, driving blind and with only Earl's taillights to home on. He'd slowed a little, and obviously couldn't see them coming. Dianne tried to count down the distance as they closed, but it was impossible; the first Earl knew about it was when the stranger was almost touching his chrome and the Triumph's lights and horn came on together. The shock was obvious as the pickup slewed from side to side, but by then the stranger had wrenched the Triumph's wheel hard over.

They passed close on Diane's side, cutting in ahead. There was a muffled bang as they swung across and something sprayed over the windshield.

One of the Triumph's headlights was out. The fender around the mounting had been peeled back by the impact, and it was vibrating in the slipstream. Earl had already dropped back; Dianne knew that no challenge would be worth damage to his machine.

The stranger put the Triumph into a screaming U-turn, and headed back down the wrong side of the road.

"Hands on the dash," he said to Dianne as they came out of the turn.

She could see the shocked expression of Earl and Earl's Girl, pinned by the Triumph's single beam coming at them, and the torn and lifted wheel arch on the pickup where they'd clipped it away; they were coming together at jet speed and then they were gone, the Triumph rocking in the wind of a near-miss.

The stranger braked and went into another U-turn, driving a red Toyota off the road. There was only desert scrub and open fields and no turnoffs, and Earl had nowhere to run. The Triumph could outpace him and outmaneuver him, and the stranger wasn't going to let him be.

They left the Toyota nose-first in the bush. Dianne saw with relief that at least Earl was thinking; he was swinging around to leave the road and head into the rough country. The pickup's four-wheel drive would be able to handle the uneven ground where the Triumph couldn't follow.

They slowed as they passed Earl's exit tracks. The pickup was way out in the fields now, its twin lights bouncing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

along almost parallel to the road. Surely, Dianne was thinking, this has to be the end of it, and as they accelerated away it seemed that she was right; but then they came to mailbox on a wooden post marking the junction of a farm access track, and they turned off the main route.

The stranger cut the lights again. The track was a dirt road that had been raised a little above the fields on either side. The way that Earl was going, they'd intercept him in about a quarter of a mile. The stranger slowed, in order to be sure of it.

Dianne couldn't see ahead in the darkness, but somehow the stranger managed to keep to the track. The Triumph was almost down to a crawl, and she could hear the pickup's motor laboring as it came no more than a few yards away and started to climb the banking.

They surged forwards, headlight on and horn blaring. Earl must have wrenched at his wheel in panic. He tried to turn away, but it was a mistake. The angle of the dirt shoulder was too steep. The pickup's wheels lifted and hung in the air for what seemed like a long time, and then the whole truck turned over heavily and slid down the banking on its side.

Dianne's hands were shaking on the dash. She'd broken most of her nails hanging on. The stranger did a five-point turnaround on the dirt road, spraying grit every time, and then they cruised past slowly on the return. There was no movement from the pickup, and no way of seeing inside the cab. Its underside glowed cherry-red in the darkness from the lamps that Earl had fitted to pick out the chromed differential.

Dianne tried to look back as they passed by. The Triumph started to pick up speed. She said, "You can't just leave them there," and her voice sounded as if it belonged to somebody else.

"Can't I just," the stranger said evenly. "Hands on the dash."

She turned and faced forward. The moving lights of the main road were ahead. It was impossible to guess what interpretation of 'God's work' was going to apply to her, but the prospects didn't look good. She tried to think, *What's the worst thing that could happen?* Only a few hours before she'd been believing that the worst was here and now, to be a plain girl in the sticks and no Prince Charming on the horizon. But the truth was nothing so trivial; it was something even grimmer than the reality of a Chicano boy flayed on a slab.

The worst, unvarnished; that the God served by the stranger might be real. That those who stood with riches behind them and their palms outstretched might be His true priests, and that the poorest and the lowest truly didn't count. That the rat race of human society was His best-loved creation, and the king rats His chosen.

Put it like that, and everything else kind of receded. She wasn't bound in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the chariot of the avenging angel, she was sitting in her Aunt Ren's car with a madman, and somehow she had to get away.

When they came to the junction, she saw her chance.

The stranger looked to his left, and Dianne grabbed for the wheel. The Triumph was beginning to move out already, but Dianne managed a quarter-turn jerk which swung them to the right. She briefly saw the mailbox to the farm pass across before them, but by the time she was sure of it they'd already hit the post. The wood splintered and the mailbox kept on coming. She covered her face as the windshield crazed and the riveted missile ripped into the car beside her.

What came then was a fast blur of lights, noise, and somewhere in the middle a jarring bang that shook her badly all the way down inside. The next thing she knew was that she was lifting her head and finding herself lying in the zone where the road broke up into the soft shoulder. Her arm felt dead, and it wouldn't take her weight when she tried to rise.

There was a big Exxon tanker (*a Reo?* she thought, stupidly) jacknifed across the road a hundred yards away. Renetta's car was jammed nosefirst underneath the trailer section. There had been almost enough clearance for the Triumph to make it through, but not quite; by the light of the flames she could see the torn canvas of the roof where she'd been thrown clear.

A man in a uniform coverall was running toward her. He was waving his arms. "*The tank's holed,*" he seemed to be shouting, "*she's gonna blow!*"

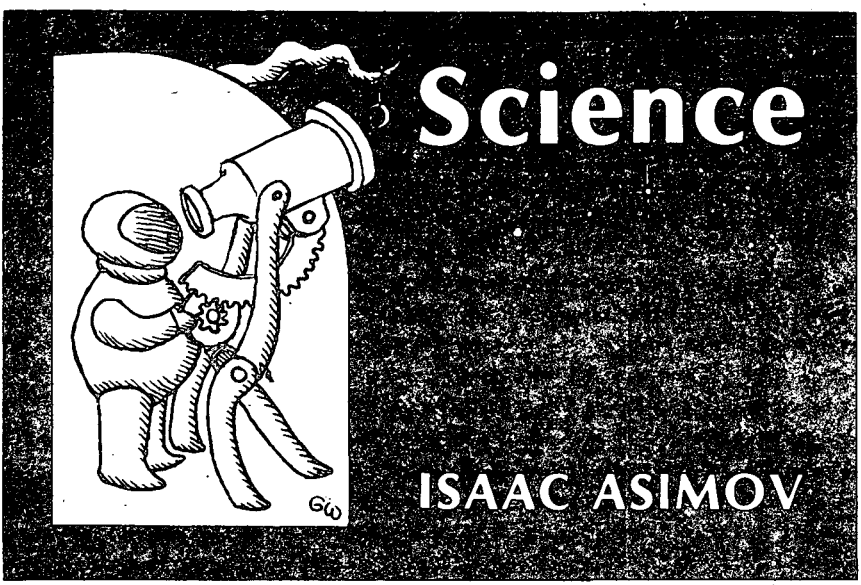
Explosion. Daylight in the desert, a cloud of fire boiling upward. The outline of the Exxon truck was just a charcoal sketch in the inferno, and there was nothing visible of Renetta's car at all. The teamster had been thrown to his knees by the shock wave and the outrush of hot air, but now he was back on his feet and shouting again as he ran toward the approaching traffic. Dianne couldn't hear him over the burning thunder.

She ought to tell somebody about Earl. She looked around, but there was nobody near. The cars were stopping way off, a line of white jewels on the roadway with more joining on behind. She rubbed at her arm, but there was still no feeling in it.

The hardest part was going to be explaining the loss of the Triumph to Aunt Ren, she thought. Renetta loved the car. She even talked to it. Dianne turned back and raised her good hand to shade her eyes, trying to make out at least some detail.

From the heart of the fire, a dark figure was walking. There was a knife in its hand, and a cold light of righteousness in its eyes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

MORE THINKING ABOUT THINKING

Back in the January 1975 issue of F & SF, there was an essay of mine entitled THINKING ABOUT THINKING. In it, I expressed my dissatisfaction with intelligence tests and gave my reasons. I presented arguments for supposing that the word "intelligence" stood for a subtle concept that could not be measured by a single figure such as that represented by an "intelligence quotient" (IQ).

I was very pleased with the article, all the more so since it was attacked by a psychologist for whose work I have little respect (see, ALAS, ALL HUMAN, June 1979).

Nor did I think I would ever have to add to it. In fact, I rather suspected I had emptied myself of all possible thought I might have on the subject of intelligence.

And then, not long ago as I write this, I found myself sitting at a dinner table with Marvin Minsky of M.I.T. on my right hand and Heinz Pagels of Rockefeller University on my left.

Pagels was conducting a three-day conference on computers, and earlier that day he had moderated a panel discussion entitled: "Has arti-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ficial intelligence research illuminated human thinking?"

I did not attend the panel (various deadlines precluded that) but Janet did, and from her account, it would seem that Minsky, one of the panelists, and John Searle of the University of California, engaged in a dispute on the nature of artificial intelligence. Minsky, the leading proponent of that field of research, opposed Searle's view that consciousness was a purely biological phenomenon and that no machine could ever have consciousness or intelligence.

At the dinner, Minsky continued to maintain his view that artificial intelligence was *not* a contradiction in terms, while Pagels was supporting the legitimacy of Searle's view. Since I was sitting between, the polite, but intense, argument was being conducted over my head both literally *and* figuratively.

I listened to the arguments with increasing anxiety, for I had carelessly agreed, months before, to give an after dinner talk that night. It now seemed to me that the Minsky-Searle debate was the only topic on the collective mind of the high-powered dinner attendees and that it would be absolutely necessary for me to talk on that subject if I were to have any chance of holding their attention.

It meant I had to go back to thinking about thinking, and that I had less than half an hour to do it. I managed, of course, or I wouldn't be telling you this. In fact, I was told that during the rest of the conference, I was occasionally quoted with approval.

I can't give you my talk word-for-word, since I spoke off the cuff as I always do, but here is a reasonable facsimile.

Suppose we start with the easy assumption that *Homo sapiens* is the most intelligent species that lives on Earth, either now or in the past. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the human brain is so large. We tend, with considerable reason, to associate the brain with intelligence, and vice versa.

The brain of the adult male has a mass of about 1.4 kilograms, on the average, and is far larger than any non-mammalian brain, past or present. This is not surprising, considering that mammals, as a class, have larger brains and are more intelligent than any other kinds of living organisms.

Among the mammals themselves, it is not surprising that the larger the organism as a whole, the larger the brain, but the human brain is out of line in this respect. It is larger than those of mammals far more massive than humans are. The human brain is larger than those of the horse, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rhinoceros, or the gorilla, for instance.

And yet the human brain is not the largest there is. The brains of elephants are larger. The largest elephant brains have been found to have masses of about 6 kilograms, or roughly 4¼ times that of the human brain. What's more, the brains of the large whales have been found to be more massive still. The most massive brain ever measured was that of a sperm whale, and it had a mass of about 9.2 kilograms, 6½ times that of the human brain.

Yet elephants and large whales, while more intelligent than most animals, are never thought to compare, even remotely, with human beings in intelligence. Quite clearly, brain mass is not all there is to be considered where intelligence is concerned.

The human brain makes up about 2 percent of the mass of the total human body. An elephant with a 6-kilogram brain, however, would have a mass of 5,000 kilograms, so that his brain would make up only about 0.12 percent of the mass of its body. As for a sperm whale, which can attain a mass of 65,000 kilograms, its 9.2-kilogram brain would make up only about 0.014 percent of the mass of its body.

In other words, per unit body-mass, the human brain is 17 times as large as that of the elephant, and 140 times as large as that of the sperm whale.

Is it fair to put brain/body mass ratio ahead of mere brain mass?

Well, it seems to give us a truthful answer, since it points up the apparently obvious fact that human beings are more intelligent than the larger brained elephants and whales. Besides, we might argue it out (probably in a simplistic manner) in this fashion—

The brain controls the working of the body, and what is left-over from these low thought control duties can be reserved for activities such as imagination, abstract reasoning, and creative fancy. Though the brains of elephants and whales are large, the bodies of those mammals are enormous, so that their brains, large though they are, are fully preoccupied with all the routine of running those vast masses, and have very little left over for "higher" functions. Elephants and whales are therefore less intelligent than human beings despite the size of their brains.

(And that's why women can have brains 10 percent less massive than those of men, on the average, and not be 10 percent less intelligent. Their bodies are smaller, too, and their brain/body mass ratio is, if anything, a trifle higher than those of men.)

Still, the brain/body mass ratio can't be everything either. Primates

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(the apes and monkeys) all have high brain/body mass ratios and, on the whole, the smaller the primate, the higher the ratio. In some small monkeys, that brain makes up 5.7 percent of the body mass, and that is nearly three times the ratio of human beings.

Why, then, aren't these small monkeys more intelligent than human beings? Here, the answer may be that their brains are just too small to serve the purpose.

For really high intelligence, you need a brain massive enough to provide the thought power necessary, and a body small enough not to use up the entire brain and leave nothing for thinking. This combination of large brain and small body seems to meet its best balance in the human being.

But wait! Just as primates tend to have a higher brain/body ratio as they grow smaller, so do the cetaceans (the whale family). The common dolphin is no more massive than a man, on the whole, but it has a brain that is about 1.7 kilograms in mass, or 1/5 more massive than the human brain. The brain/body ratio is 2.4 percent.

In that case, why isn't the dolphin more intelligent than the human being? Can there be some qualitative difference between the two kinds of brains that condemns the dolphin to relative stupidity?

For instance, the actual brain cells are located at the surface of the cerebrum and make up the "gray matter." The interior of the brain is made up, to a large extent, of the fat-swathed processes extending from the cells and (thanks to the color of the fat) this is the "white matter."

It is the gray matter that is associated with intelligence, and, therefore, the surface area of the brain is more important than its mass. As we consider species in order of increasing intelligence, we find that the surface area of the brain increases more rapidly than the mass does. One way this becomes apparent is that the surface area increases to the point where it cannot be spread out smoothly over the brain's interior, but wrinkles into "convolutions." A convoluted brain would have a larger surface area than a smooth brain of the same mass.

Therefore, we associate convolutions with intelligence, and, to be sure, mammalian brains are convoluted while non-mammalian brains are not, and a monkey's brain is more convoluted than a cat's brain. A human brain, not surprisingly, is more convoluted than that of any land mammal, even including such relatively intelligent ones as chimpanzees and elephants.

And yet the dolphin's brain is more massive than the human brain, has higher brain/body mass-ratio, and, *in addition,* is more convoluted than the human brain is.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Now why aren't dolphins more intelligent than human beings? To explain that, we have to fall back on the supposition that there is some shortcoming in the structure of the dolphin's brain cells, or in its cerebral organization, points for which there is no evidence.

Let me, however, suggest an alternative view. How do we know dolphins are not more intelligent than human beings?

To be sure, they don't have a technology, but that's not surprising. They live in water, where fire is impossible, and the skillful use of fire is the fundamental basis of human technology. What's more, life in water makes streamlining essential, so that dolphins lack the equivalent of the human being's delicately manipulative hands.

But is technology alone a sufficient measure of intelligence? When it suits us, we dismiss technology. Consider the structures built by such social insects as bees, ants, and termites, or the delicate tracery of the spider web. Do these accomplishments make a bee, ant, termite, or spider more intelligent than the gorilla which builds a crude tree nest?

We say "No," without a moment's hesitation. We consider that the lower animals, however marvellous their accomplishments, proceed only on instinct, and that this is inferior to conscious thought. Yet that may be only our self-serving judgement.

Might it not be conceivable that dolphins would consider our technology the result of a lower form of thinking, and dismiss it as evidence of intelligence, in a self-serving judgement of their own?

Of course, human beings have the power of speech. We make use of complex modulations of sound to express infinitely subtle ideas, and no other species of living thing does that, or comes anywhere near it. (Nor can they communicate with equivalent complexity, versatility and subtlety by any other means, as far as we know.)

Yet the humpback whale sings complex "songs," while the dolphin is capable of producing a greater variety of different sounds than we can. What makes us so sure that dolphins can't or don't speak?

But intelligence is such a noticeable thing. If dolphins are so smart, why isn't it *obvious* that they are so smart?

I maintained in THINKING ABOUT THINKING that there are different kinds of intelligence among human beings and that IQ tests are misleading for that reason. Even if this were so, however, all the human intelligential (I have to invent that word) varieties clearly belong to the same genus. It is possible for us to recognize such varieties, even though they are quite different. We can see that Beethoven had one kind of intelligence, Shake-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

speare another, Newton still another, and Peter Piper (the pickle-picking expert) yet another, and we can understand the value of each.

Yet what of an intelligential variety altogether different from anything any human being has? Would we even recognize it as intelligence at all, no matter how we studied it?

Suppose a dolphin, with its enormous, convoluted brain and its vast armory of sounds, has a mind which could consider complex ideas and a language that could express them with infinite subtlety. But suppose those ideas and that language were so different from anything to which we are accustomed that we cannot even grasp the fact that they are ideas and language, let alone understand their content.

Suppose a colony of termites, all together, had a community brain that could react in a way so different from our individual ones that we would not see the community intelligence no matter how glaringly "obvious" it might be.

The trouble may be partially semantic. We insist on defining "thinking" in such a way that we come to the automatic conclusion that only human beings think. (In fact, bigots throughout history have been certain that only males rather similar in appearance to themselves could think, and that women and "inferior races" could not. Self-serving definitions can do a great deal.)

Suppose we defined "thinking" as being that sort of action that led to a species taking those measures that would best insure its own survival. By that definition, every species thinks in some fashion. Human thinking becomes but one more variety, and one that is not necessarily better than others.

In fact, if we consider that the human species, with the full capacity for forethought, and knowing exactly what it is doing, and what may happen, nevertheless has a very good chance of destroying itself in a nuclear holocaust — the only logical conclusion we can come to, by my definition, is that *Homo sapiens* thinks more poorly, and is less intelligent, than any species that lives, or has ever lived, on Earth.

It may be, that just as the IQ-niks achieve their results by carefully defining intelligence in such a way as to make themselves and people like themselves "superior," so humanity as a whole does the same by its careful definition of what constitutes "thinking."

To make this plainer, let's consider an analogy.

Human beings "walk." They do so on two legs with their mammalian

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

body tipped upward so as to produce a backward bend to the spine in the lumbar region.

We might define "walking" as motion on two legs with the body balanced on a recurved spine. By this definition, walking would be unique to the human being, and we might well be proud of this fact, and with reason. This sort of walking freed our forelimbs from all necessity to help us move about (except under certain emergency conditions) and gave us permanently available hands. This development of upright posture preceded the development of our large brain and may, indeed, have led to it.

Other animals don't walk. They move on four legs or on six, eight, dozens, or none. Or they fly, or swim. Even those quadrupeds who can rise to their hind legs (such as bears and apes) do so only temporarily and are most comfortable on all fours.

There are animals that are strictly bipedal, such as kangeroos and birds, but they often hop rather than walk. Even birds that walk (as pigeons and penguins do) are primarily fliers or swimmers. And birds that never do anything but walk (or — its faster cousin — run), such as the ostrich, still lack the recurved spine.

Suppose, then, that we insisted on making "walking" totally unique and did so to the point where we lacked words for ways in which other species progressed. Suppose we were content to say that human beings were "walkative" and all other species were not, and refused to stretch our vocabulary beyond that.

If we insisted on doing so with sufficient fervor we would not need to pay any attention to the beautiful efficiency with which some species hop, or leap, or run, or fly, or sail, or dive, or slither. We would develop no phrase such as "animal locomotion" to cover all these varieties of progression.

And if we dismissed all forms of animal locomotion but our own as simply "non-walkative," we might never have to face the fact that human locomotion is, in many ways, not as graceful as that of a horse or a hawk; and is, indeed, one of the least graceful and admirable forms of animal locomotion.

Suppose, then, we invent a word to cover all the ways in which living things might behave in such a way as to meet a challenge or to promote survival. Call it "zorking." Thinking, in the human sense, might be one form of zorking, while other species of living things might display other forms of zorking.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If we approach zorking without preconceived judgements, we might find that thinking is not always the best way of zorking, and we might stand a slightly better chance of understanding the zorking of dolphins or of termite communities.

Or suppose we consider the problem of whether machines can think; whether a computer can ever have consciousness; whether robots can possibly feel emotion; where, in short, we are to attain, in future, such a thing as true "artificial intelligence."

How can we argue such a thing, if we don't first stop to consider what intelligence might be? If it is something only a human being can have by definition, then, of course, a machine can't have it.

But any species can zork, and it might be that computers will be able to, also. Computers won't zork, perhaps, in a fashion that any biological species will, so we need a new word for what they do, too. In my impromptu talk at the computer dinner, I used the word "grotch" and I suppose that will do was well as any other.

Among human beings there are an indefinite number of different ways of zorking, different ways that are sufficiently alike for all to be included under the general heading of "thinking." And among computers, there are liable to be an indefinite number of ways of zorking, too; but ways so different from those found in human beings as to be included in the general heading of "grotching."

(And non-human animals may zork in different ways still so that we would have to invent dozens of different words for zork varieties and classify them in complicated fashion. What's more, as computers develop, we may find that "grotching" isn't sufficient, so that we would have to work up sub-headings. But all that's for the future. My crystal ball isn't infinitely clear.)

To be sure, we design our computers in such a way that they can solve problems that are of interest to us, and therefore they give us the illusion that they "think." We must recognize, though, that even when a computer solves a problem that we ourselves would have to solve in the absence of a computer, it and we nevertheless solve them by totally different processes. They grotch and we think, and it may be useless to sit about and debate whether computers think. Computers might as well sit around and debate whether human beings grotch.

But is it reasonable to suppose that human beings would create an artificial intelligence so different from human intelligence as to require a recognition of computer-grotching as independent of human-thinking?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Why not? It's happened before. For countless thousands of years, human beings transported objects by tucking them under their arms or balancing them on their heads. In doing so, they could only transport so much mass, at most.

If human beings piled objects on the backs of their donkeys, horses, oxen, camels, or elephants, they could transport larger masses. That, however, is just the substitution of the direct use of larger muscles for smaller ones.

Eventually, however, human beings invented an artificial device that made transportation easier. How did the machine bring this about? Did it do it by producing an artificial walk, run, fly, swim, or any of the myriad other forms of animal locomotion?

——No. Some human being in the dim days of prehistory invented the wheel and axle. As a result, a much larger mass could be placed in a cart and dragged by human or animal muscles than could be carried by those muscles directly.

To my way of thinking, the wheel and axle is the most astonishing invention ever made by human beings. The human use of fire was at least preceded by the observation of natural fires set by lightning. But the wheel and axle had no natural ancestry. It does not exist in nature; no life-form has evolved it to this day. Thus, "machine-aided locomotion" was, from its inception, utterly different from all forms of animal locomotion; and, in the same way, it would not be surprising if mechanical zorking was different from all forms of biological zorking.

Of course, primitive carts couldn't move by themselves, but, eventually, the steam engine was invented, and then later the internal combustion engine and the rocket — none of which act anything like muscles.

Computers are, as yet, at the pre-steam engine stage. Computers can work but can't do so "by themselves." Eventually, the equivalent of a steam engine will be developed, and the computers will be able to solve problems by themselves, but still by a process totally different from that of the human brain. They will still be grotching rather than thinking.

All this seems to rule out fears that computers will "replace" us, or that human beings will become superfluous and die out.

After all, wheels haven't made legs superfluous. There are times when walking is more convenient and more useful than rolling. Picking one's way over rough ground is easy when walking, very difficult by automobile. And I wouldn't think of getting from my bed to the bathroom by any process other than walking.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But can't computers eventually do anything human beings can do, even if they grotch rather than think? Can't computers grotch up symphonies, dramas, scientific theories, love affairs — anything you care to name?

Maybe. Every once in a while I see a machine designed to lift legs over obstructions so that it walks. However, the machine is so complicated and the motions are so ungraceful, that it strikes me that no one is ever going to take the huge trouble to try to produce and use such things as anything but a tour de force (like the airplane that flew the English Channel by bicycle-power — and will never be used again).

Grotching, whatever it is, is quite obviously best adapted to the exceedingly rapid and inerrant manipulation of arithmetical quantities. Even the simplest computer can grotch the multiplication and division of huge numbers much faster than human beings can think their way through to the solution.

That doesn't mean grotching is "superior" to thinking; it just means that grotching is better adapted to that particular process. As for thinking, that is well adapted to processes that involve insight, intuition, and the creative combination of data to produce unexpected results.

Computers can perhaps be designed to do such things after a fashion, just as "mathematical prodigies" can grotch after a fashion — but either is a waste of time.

Let thinkers and grotchers work at their specialties and pool the results. I imagine that human beings *and* computers, working together, can do far more than either could alone. It is the symbiosis of the two that represents the shape of the future.

One more point — If grotching and thinking are widely different things, can one expect the study of computers ever to illuminate the problem of human thought?

Let us go back to the problem of locomotion.

A steam engine can power machines to do work that is ordinarily done by muscles, and to do it more intensely and tirelessly, but that steam engine is in no way similar to the muscle in structure. In the steam engine, water is heated to steam and the expanding steam pushes pistons. In the muscle, a delicate protein named "actomyosin" undergoes molecular changes which cause the muscle to contract.

It might seem that you could study boiling water and expanding steam for a million years and not be able to deduce one thing about actomyosin from that. Or, conversely, that you could study every molecular change

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

actomyosin can undergo and not learn one thing about what makes water boil.

In 1824, however, a young French physicist, Nicolas L. S. Carnot (1796-1832) studied steam engines in order to determine what factors controlled the efficiency with which it worked. In the process, he was the first to begin the line of argument that, by the end of the century, had fully developed the laws of thermodynamics.

These laws are among the most powerful generalizations in physics, and it was found that they applied in full rigor to living systems as well as to such simpler things as steam engines.

Muscular action, however complicated its innermost workings, must labor under the constraints of the laws of thermodynamics just as steam engines must, and this tells us something about muscles that is enormously important. What's more, we learned it from steam engines, and might never have learned it from a study of muscles alone.

Similarly, the study of computers may never tell us, directly, anything at all about the intimate structure of the human brain, or of the human brain-cell. Nevertheless, the study of grotching may lead to the determination of the basic laws of zorking, and we may find that these laws of zorking apply to thinking as well as to grotching.

It may be, then, that even though computers are nothing like brains, computers may teach us things about brains that we might never discover, by studying brains alone — and so, in the last analysis, I am on Minsky's side.

A HAPPY 25

We doubt that very many noticed when Isaac Asimov wrote a short science article for the November 1958 F&SF titled "The Dust of Ages." After all, in 1958 Dr. Asimov was purely an SF writer who had a fine standing in the field but was little known outside it. But this, one of his earliest excursions into non-fiction, seemed to mark a turning point. In the 25 years since, Isaac Asimov has published well over 200 books on a wide variety of subjects, mostly non-fiction, and he is recognized as probably the foremost science popularizer in the country. After accomplishing that, he returned to science fiction to write a Hugo and Nebula award-winning novel, "The Gods Themselves" (1972) and a bestseller, "Foundations Edge" (1982). The man has a competing SF magazine named after him, is a much in demand

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

speaker and lecturer ... in short he has become a household name.

But to us, the remarkable thing, the event we are celebrating here, is that he has continued to contribute this science column to F&SF. This article, his 301st, marks his 25th anniversary as an F&SF columnist. Almost all the essays have been collected in book form and published by Doubleday; a list of these book collections follows:

1) FACT AND FANCY (1962)
2) VIEW FROM A HEIGHT (1963)
3) ADDING A DIMENSION (1964)
4) OF TIME AND SPACE AND OTHER THINGS (1965)
5) FROM EARTH TO HEAVEN (1966)
6) SCIENCE, NUMBERS AND I (1968)
7) THE SOLAR SYSTEM AND BACK (1970)
8) THE STARS IN THEIR COURSES (1971)
9) THE LEFT HAND OF THE ELECTRON (1972)
10) THE TRAGEDY OF THE MOON (1973)
11) ASIMOV ON ASTRONOMY (1974)
12) ASIMOV ON CHEMISTRY (1974)
13) OF MATTERS GREAT AND SMALL (1975)
14) ASIMOV ON PHYSICS (1976)
15) THE PLANET THAT WASN'T (1976)
16) ASIMOV ON NUMBERS (1977)
17) QUASAR, QUASAR, BURNING BRIGHT (1978)
18) THE ROAD TO INFINITY (1979)
19) THE SUN SHINES BRIGHT (1981)
20) COUNTING THE EONS (1983)
21) X STANDS FOR UNKNOWN (1984)

— EDWARD L. FERMAN

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Richard Mueller's recent F&SF stories include "Cenotaph" (June 1983) and "Welcome to Coventry" (March 1983). His new story is peripherally about an alien invasion of Earth, but the focus is really on the relationship between two musicians, and the result is something truly different and touching...

A Song for Justin

BY

RICHARD MUELLER

Winter was crowding us hard the night we hit Marysville. Johnny and I had come in on the Zipper, first-class all the way, riding the crummy with an SP brake crew. That's a mighty fine way to travel. It's becoming damned hard to catch a reefer block anymore, what with through unit trains and automated safeguards, but Johnny knew the Fresno yard boss, and he knew the brakie, so we came up warm with coffee and sandwiches. Johnny says that's the bo's A1 way to go. I'm new at this, but I'm learning.

Johnny knows a lot of folks along the line, and he's good company, especially for a quiet guy like me. I'm tough and strong and smart enough, but I don't talk much, so I miss out on a lot of things. Bumming with an old boomer like Johnny broadens my outlook and helps me learn the ropes, makes it easier for me to deal with the people I meet on the road.

The brakie, a tall fellow named Slim Hepplewhite, let us down at the south yard limit and wished us well. Johnny knew the jungle, so we set out along the cinder track, Johnny whistling and me thinking my thoughts alone, which was the way it usually was. Behind us the Zipper pulled out for Seattle, a hundred and thirty reefers off to the cold, damp, rainy Northwest. In a week or two, snow. They could have my share. Marysville was as far north as I wanted to come in October. From here we'd catch a BN freight east, then south for the last harvests, stay warm, stay alive, stay lost in the armies of the road. In the spring there'd be work in Chicago or Milwaukee, then down to Britt in August, two months in Washington working on the brewers' harvest, and Texas next winter. Johnny had it all figured

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out, and that was fine by me, for the world beyond the road was upside down and held nothing in it that was mine.

The trail into Marysville jungle led through a dry-wash culvert, then a stand of sooty cedars, to a tent city perched on the banks of a muddy creek-wallow. There were only about forty boes there then, but they knew Johnny and they gave us skin all around.

"Thankya, thankya," Johnny drawled, pulling his flask and trading swigs with the men that clustered around us. "Nice t'see Maryville agin. This here's my pal, Perfesser." I nodded and shook hands, easing off my pack. Another ritual. I accept your hospitality and lay my burden down. There were always a few that would make like they knew you, whether they did or not: there were the first time I ever set foot in a camp. Some men are like that, the ones that know lonesome and want to make it easier on the next guy.

Johnny led me through the get-t'-know with me pulling my share of snorts from the local jugs. I never carried a jug, so I passed around cigarettes while Johnny got us up to date.

"Who's king o' the camp here?" he piped. A tall, mournful Chinese in a dark suit and dirty, tieless shirt motioned toward a line shack up under the trees, the only permanent structure visible.

"Same as last time you were here, Johnny. Admiral Dan and his little girl are still living up to the Palace. He'll be real happy to see you."

"Ol' Danny Lee. Well, Perfesser, we'll have ta mosey up later an' pay our respects. Danny an' me goes way back."

"Why they calls ya 'Perfesser'?" a short man in a cloth cap asked. I smiled and shrugged.

" 'Cause he used ta perfess, dammit!" Johnny growled. "We never ast you why they calls ya 'Limpwick'!" There was laughter and the short man laughed too, and traded shoulder punches with Johnny. Johnny was known for his sharp tongue, and every bo west of the Mississippi had felt it at one time or another.

"What's this 'Perfesser' shit?" a great dark voice boomed, and the group fell silent. Standing in the shadows of a tired willow was the biggest black man I'd ever seen, seven feet if he was an inch, and all muscle. There were no teeth in his scowl, but his eyes caught the moon, and he held a large crowbar in his right hand as lightly as if it were a newspaper. Johnny stepped forward and squinted up at the giant.

"Mose? Mose Schecter?"

"Cactus Johnny," the giant said, showing teeth in a brief smile. "I thought you was dead in the 'Braska country. What you doin' travelin' with a 'Perfesser'?"

Johnny moved up next to me and squared off. I'd never seen Johnny

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fight, but you don't boom for forty years without being tough. Still, Schecter easily made more than both of us. "He's my friend an' pal," Johnny said defiantly. "We travels together. Ya don't like him an' yer hasta fight me, Mose."

Schecter regarded him for a long moment, then threw back his head and laughed: high, wide, musical laughter.

"I could no do that, Johnny. You'd whup me fer sure." He turned to me and stuck out a hand the size of a catcher's mitt. "Any friend to Johnny is a friend to me. No offense." I shook, his hand enfolding mine gently without trying to crush it, which he easily could have done.

"That's O.K., Mose. Likewise."

"Good. You two can stay up ta my place."

Mose's place was a massive lean-to built of sheet tin, room enough for six or seven, or four normal men and Mose. Johnny hardly took up any room at all. Mose showed us pads of bunch grass where we could throw our flops, then started coffee.

"Perfesser, huh? Sorry I got excited back there, but we had a run-in with a perfesser las' summer back in Utah. Sayed he wanted ta study us. He seem nice enough an' he stay two weeks — I's workin' construction out a Provo an' had myself a real nice shack up ta the jungle — he took all sorts of notes an' interview everybody. Then one night I come back from the job an' everybody gone, shacks tore up, everythin' stole. One ol' boy, tiny Whalen, he seen it. He says the cops come out with a coupla Arkies an' round everybody up. From now on I stay away from perfessers."

I nodded. I'd heard that story too, but I hadn't heard anything about Arkies. I shook my head.

"I wasn't that kind of professor, Mose."

"What kind was you?"

"Music," I replied absently, instantly regretting I'd said it. Mose's eyes brightened, and he reached into his coat and pulled out a battered Hohner F harmonica.

"What you play? You play mouth harp?"

"No. I taught. I played violin ... fiddle, but I don't anymore. I just don't...." I thought of Justin, and all the old feelings rushed into that vacuum inside me, the permanent hole that drives a man to the rails because the only thing that could fill it is forever gone. It seemed like a million years ago and far too close. It would always be too close.

" 'Scuse me, Mose."

Johnny stood up as I left. "Sorry, Mose. Perfesser don't like talkin' about his past," I heard him say.

"Thas all right, Johnny. Don't know many boes that do."

Justin and I could have met any number of places, as our paths crossed continuously, but she was waitressing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at a greasy spoon just off campus where I went for my noon beer and cheeseburger. I always bought to go, and one day she chided me for never tipping the waitress.

"Why should I tip? I never need your services."

"You never ask for my services. Who's to say what you need?"

It went on like that for a few weeks, little quips and greetings. You get to know a person that way. Then one day, knowing that I was a teacher, she asked me what I taught.

"Music? I'm a musician. What do you play?"

"Violin, cello, viola da gamba."

"Is that like a viola?"

"Yes, but it's older."

"Like you, huh?"

She was younger, with dark hair, dark eyes, and a smart mouth. Just right. I liked them independent, intelligent, lusty and, if at all possible, attractive — and Justin was attractive. It was good, entirely too good, and I began to get interested. We traded a few more wisecracks, then:

"Why don't you bring that fiddle around to the Ness some night. I sing Thursdays and Saturdays."

"Do you? Sing what, punk rock?"

She made a face. "No, I'm a folk singer. Come on by." She wrote down the address. I reckoned as I might. She smiled and said she'd like that.

I thought about it all week, how I hadn't time to get involved with a woman, now with classes coming on fast and me still fighting for a slot on the tenure track. And how I was probably kidding myself anyway. California was still deep in the dregs of the Me Decade, and besides, I wasn't the kind of guy women fell for. Then, Saturday morning, cleaning out my pockets for the Laundromat, I found the address.

The Loch Ness Monster Pub was a Pasadena tradition, at least among the local Scots-Irish community: sawdust floor, Commonwealth flags, John Courage and Guinness on tap, and a jukebox that ran the gamut from Clancy Brothers to the Beatles. I had to smile when I saw it, and it made me homesick for my grad school days in the Midwest. The blackboard announced: "Justin Lee Brown — Seditious Folk Songs."

She was wearing a plaid shirt and blue jeans, carrying a guitar, and I realized I hadn't much time. I'd have to pull away or I'd be in it up to my neck. I'm that kind of a guy, or I was.

"You bring your fiddle?"

"In the car."

"Go get it."

My fiddle was a Guarnerius, the instrument of a classical musician, but that night I discovered an aptitude for what my colleagues called "the folk idiom." I also discovered the love of my life. Sadly, for some of us, there's only one.

With Justin, a young Irishman named Liam Gallagher on guitar and mandolin, and a banjo player named Mike McIntosh, we began playing the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

folk clubs around Los Angeles, and within six months were turning enough extra money to start making plans. I decided to ask Justin to marry me, but as usual she was ahead of me, and I did the accepting.

That was our golden time, those first two years. Justin began teaching guitar classes, I got my tenure, and we found a cottage we could afford a few blocks off campus. The second spring I took a leave of absence, and we began a western states tour which we parlayed into an album on flying fish. It gave us enough money to make that trip to Scotland we'd talked about: to tramp the Highlands with a tape recorder, to visit the standing stones, to walk the ley lines, to stand on the banks of Loch Ness. The day we arrived back in L.A., the Arkies came.

It was a short war and relatively bloodless — provided you didn't live in Moscow or Washington, D.C. — and not enough was found there to determine whether blood had been shed or merely vaporized. In forty-eight hours the great ships from Arcturus were master of the Earth, and there wasn't much any of us could do about it but wait. Later, when we got over the initial shock of being conquered, we had a second one to absorb. It was back to business as usual.

I don't know what we had expected, but between science fiction and the movies, I suppose we felt that we were either going to become slaves or something's food supply. There was a very nervous week of parties and lovemaking, and more than a few people either found religion or committed suicide. Or, in some cases I guess, both. Justin and I just held on to each other and waited. And then, the announcements: certain levies would be made — pilots, computer specialists, engineers, agronomists, psychologists, police and military officials, biologists, economists, geneticists. The list was long, but when taken as a measure of the whole, it was an infinitesimal price to pay for defeat. There were fewer than two thousand Americans in all, with proportionate numbers from other countries, though higher in the industrial West and Japan.

I knew one of them, a university research chemist named Kline. They sent a National Guard truck for him, manned by bored-looking GIs. He said good-bye, looking desperately frightened, and got aboard. We were all of us certain that we'd never see him again, but a little over a week later, I ran into him at the gas station. When I asked what they'd put him to doing, Kline shrugged and said he was doing basically the same research he'd been involved in at the university, but with no class load. He invited Justin and me over for dinner, though we'd never been that close before. I suppose he was grasping at some sort of normalcy, but for various reasons we never went.

September came and school reopened. The world attempted to adjust. There was a building boom, as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thousands of people got jobs replacing the gap that Washington had left. Railroads and highways had to be bridged around Thirty Mile Lake, the vast crater that now sparkled between Maryland and Virginia. Duplicate records had to be located, elections held. bureaus reformed, services reinstituted. Similar things were probably happening in the Soviet Union. Armies stood down and missiles moved off the pads; submarines came home; aircraft were broken up. There were scattered incidences of resistance and a few Pyrrhic victories, but we were overmatched and knew it. It seemed as if life was now something to be gotten used to.

The days passed and the situation began to level out. There would be shortages as things we had always taken for granted were needed elsewhere. Travel was allowed, with permits. IDs were issued. The new United Nations announced compulsary birth control and the pope balked. The new pope understood the need to limit ourselves, now that the food supply was being divided, and gave his blessing. It was automatic, something to do with the water, though a lot of couples applied to have children and many were accepted. Justin and I thought about it but we decided to wait. There was no telling what ultimate end the Arkies had in mind for us, and we didn't want to bring a child into a world that might not survive.

There were benefits too. An end to war was the biggest one. We went out to San Pedro to watch the day the National Guard hauled away the bombs from the Naval Arsenal. The Arkies also rid us of nuclear power and gave us fusion. They wiped out cancer and leukemia, genetically screened children, put an end to the drug traffic and VD and MS and arthritis and psoriasis, almost as if it pleased them to see what kind of improvements they could make in the human condition. If you suffered from one of those problems, I guess you were pretty grateful.

You could say that they made their presence felt rather than seen. No pictures of them were released, no descriptions were printed. They seldom traveled abroad, and then it was by closed conveyance. There were Arkie quarters in the governmental center of each city, each state capital, in Omaha, D.C., but in those days few of us had ever seen one. The first description I'd gotten wasn't from Kline. He'd dealt only with humans. We finally found out from a student of Justin's.

Jim Honeyman was a major in the National Guard, who had been an exec for one of the film studios. With the coming of the Arkies he'd been permanently activated (at his civilian pay rate — the Arkies weren't stupid). He'd come to check on Justin's class for what he referred to as Arkie Central (they themselves had no such name designations). It was routine. They checked on everything.

Whether Jim was attracted to Justin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

or simply because he'd played folk guitar for years, he stayed on and enrolled. After he met me, if he had any feelings for Justin, he never voiced them. Honeyman was like that, a gentleman to the bone. And he was a good musician. He used to sit in with us from time to time, and he and Mike performed as a duet. We both knew what he did, but that sort of thing no longer bothered me. Everybody worked for the Arkies now in one way or another.

It tended to rankle Justin though, and as much as she liked Jim, she used to ride him pretty hard about "scabbing for the bugs." Having no idea what an Arkie looked like, she preferred to think of them as "bug-eyed monsters," or simply "bugs."

It was a chilly night in November and we were down at the Loch, the three of us, waiting for Liam and Betty Gallagher to come in. The plan was dinner and a movie and we were killing time.

"So, if they're not bugs, what are they?"

Honeyman spread his hands and shrugged.

He was a good ten years older than I, and since the guard had had to take up the slack for the dissolving army and overworked police, he had begun to show his age. I knew how this line of questioning would go. Jim, like everyone who dealt with the Arkies, was under strict orders about giving any information at all.

"You know I can't talk about my job."

Justin nodded, but hauled out her pack and produced a small spiral notebook and pencil, which she flipped open and passed to him. At the top of the page she had neatly printed IF YOU CAN'T TALK ABOUT THEM, DRAW ONE.

Honeyman looked at the pad, and at Justin, who was grinning. I shrugged. "She takes me by surprise all the time, Jim."

Jim laughed loudly, taking the pencil and sketching rapidly while he talked.

"Did I ever tell you about the car I used to have? Well, it was the damnedest looking thing...." As he sketched, he used the phony story to point up details on the drawing, writing explanations and measurements on the sketch. It showed a practiced hand and it was a chilling piece of work.

The Arkies were taller than humans, averaging in at seven-plus feet and shaped like nothing so much as a great, sleek bullet with appendages. At the summit was a cap which probably contained the braincase and which sloped back under to meet the body. Where the sensory organs were was anyone's guess, but there were two sets of manipulative appendages. At the concave curve below the braincase were thirty short tentacles, some dry and rubbery, some slick and coated with a lubricating slime, and some with minute openings and spurs. They served for minor or detailed work.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At three places around the conical body and also coming from under the braincap, but below the manipular cluster, were three longer tentacles, at least thirty feet in length, which were kept tightly coiled when not in use. When used they could flick out rapidly and seize objects or serve as weapons. Under each tentacle was a vertical two-foot slit, rimmed internally with cilia. Jim implied that these slits were more for diagnosis than digestion, and he was used to seeing them routinely snatch up small articles and pass them inside, removing them a few seconds later, apparently no worse for the wear. It was Jim's opinion that whatever sensory mechanisms the things did possess were useful only up to a point and probably took the form of broadcast radar located in the cap. For detailed analysis (he called it scan), smaller objects would be passed inside. When Justin asked about larger, human-sized objects, Honeyman implied that the Arkies were not above dismantling things in the name of scientific investigation.

The locomotory apparatus were large tube feet, like those of a starfish, which enabled the Arkies to perambulate slowly about. They had solved this difficulty with machinery: small air sleds that carried them wherever they wished to go.

After Justin, Liam, Betty, and I had gotten a good look at the sketch, Jim insisted on burning it, but Justin reproduced it later from memory.

The conversation put a crimp in the evening, and instead of going to see *Revenge of the Jedi*, we settled on a musical. I don't suppose any of us could get that drawing out of our minds. I had trouble sleeping that night and lay awake, holding Justin as she tossed in whatever dark dreams were gripping her. Somehow we couldn't drive out the helplessness that we felt.

That first winter under the Arkies, everything went to hell. There were shortages, stoppages, and trouble. The National Guard had to fire on strikers at Rockwell in December. Two weeks later in Bremerton, a guard infantry battalion refused riot duty and struck, then routed the tank platoon sent to bring them into line. When the survivors of the battalion were captured, they were publicly executed on national television, and within six hours, the country was in open insurrection. Though police units generally remained loyal to the Arkie government, the guardsmen either downed arms or joined the strikers, moving into the city centers and holding drumhead tribunals on any collaborators they could catch. The Arkies retreated into their fortresses and waited.

Jim Honeyman showed up at our house the night the revolt began, wearing civilian clothes. His guard unit had voted to join the strike, and Honeyman, a popular officer, was allowed to leave unmolested. His unit moved to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

join the New California Provisional Army near Barstow, but Jim, knowing what must follow, had refused the final gesture.

It was a tense week for us. Justin's sympathies were with the revolt, and I was convinced she was working underground with the strikers, but as much as I disliked the Arkies, I could see the same signs Honeyman had. The revolt was a doomed cause. There wasn't much you could do with tanks and machine guns when a heavily armed fleet stood in orbit above your planet, but we listened to the rebel media and watched as the revolt spread — to Canada, Italy, China, Australia, Chile — keeping track of it on maps and waiting.

Things were very touchy between Justin and me that week. I think she knew the realities of the situation as well as I, but there was that element of spirit about her that saw the revolt as valid and necessary, doomed cause or not. As Captain Chapman, Honeyman's exec, had put it when he assumed command: "Most of us were born in freedom and we can't live in slavery. Even if we die, we'll die free."

Five days after the revolt began, Media Free Detroit broadcast the first pictures of Arkies in custody, after Arkie Central there had fallen to the Provisional Army. It was the first look at an Arkie for most people.

The broadcast went out at 8:45 in the evening. At 8:57 Media Free Detroit went off the air. At 9:01 all power went off in the greater Los Angeles area. We stood together on the porch and watched the darkened sky, knowing somehow that it was finished. An hour later Liam and Betty arrived with a transistor radio that was playing the same announcement over and over:

"At 8:57 this evening the following cities ceased to exist: Detroit, Toronto, Milan, Sydney, Kiev, Santiago, Belfast, Lyon, Bremen, Barcelona, Nairobi, Pretoria, Calcutta, Hangchow, Sao Paulo. All insurrectionists will down arms and surrender immediately to loyal authorities. All military units will turn over disloyal officers for trial. All personnel in the following areas — transportation, communications, power, health and safety, maintenance, security, and administration — will report to their posts and remain there. If you are unsure of your status, report to your post. If the greatest possible compliance is not achieved in six hours, a city will be destroyed at that time and every six hours thereafter. The decision is yours."

People, stunned, began moving to comply. At 2:57 the next morning the revolt collapsed as a final city was obliterated. Ironically, it was Hiroshima.

The judgments and reprisals took three months and touched nearly everyone. There was only one penalty — death — and over seven hundred thousand Americans were executed, including Chapman, Kline, and Mike McIntosh, whom someone had denounced as being a striker. The rest of us waited

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nervously, expecting to be identified, but it didn't happen.

It was rough. The Arkies patched things up, and by that summer there were the beginnings of a return to normalcy, but you could tell by the faces you met that the revolt was over and there wouldn't be another. Again the suicides, again the clinging, and through it all Justin and I stayed together. I could see the pain and bitterness in her, the resentment that I had not shared her commitment and the gratitude that I had held her back, that we were still alive and together. But there was a constant need for nurturing, for fighting off the self-contempt that we felt. We were losers. We were an inferior race and it hurt us. Oh, not everyone, but Justin and I felt it and that was enough. Honeyman had stopped coming around, caught up in his own private guilt, I guess, and Liam and Betty had headed back east to book passage for Ireland. His family had come from near Belfast, and he wanted to see if they were still alive. Justin and I still went down to the Loch on Saturdays, but we seldom played.

On a cool night in October, Jimmy the bartender offered us each a few pints if we'd play for him. We couldn't turn it down: beer was too expensive. We struck up a quiet reel, then the series of hornpipes we used to play for a warm-up, while a few of the regulars drifted in. Justin started to pick up the tempo, and I could see the shine had come back to her eyes, if only a little. When we finished, I looked at her and said, "How about one you can sing?"

There was a hesitancy, then, "All right."

"'Goodnight Lovin' Trail'?"

"Sure."

We eased into it, Jimmy and a few of the others picking up the chorus. It's a sad song, but with lean emotions and sharp images. It went back to a time when things were simpler and totally human.

When we finished, to a high rolling harmony and applause, Justin's cheeks were glistening. She put down her guitar, put her arms around me and told me that it was going to be all right. I knew then that we were whole again. I was crying myself.

"That's the best you two an' this place 'ave sounded in a long time," Jimmy said, bringing us a pitcher of stout with a card that read "Compliments of the Monster." He sat down, poured out three and raised his glass. "Nothing stops the music."

"Nothing stops the music," we echoed.

"It sure don't," came a melodious western voice. Leaning in the doorway was tall man in muttonchop sideboards, bluejean jacket and pants, carrying a guitar case and pack. I had seen that face before and couldn't place it, but Justin evidently had no such trouble. She almost overturned the table in surprise. The stranger tipped his hat. She smiled.

"Will you join us, Phil?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Don't mind if I do."

He hoisted up his gear and drifted over.

"You know him?" I whispered.

"Only by reputation. That's Phil Brewster. That's his song we just played." We had a couple of Brewster's albums at home, but I hadn't made the connection. Brewster had been a hobo, cowboy, miner, union organizer, railroad brakeman, and folksinger, *and*, though Honeyman's age, he looked closer to mine. Jimmy ran for more beer as Brewster collapsed his lanky frame into a chair, pushing his gear under a table. He offered me a big, dirty hand, thought better of it, wiped it on his trouser leg and stuck it back out. "Road grit," he explained apologetically.

He said he knew who we were, that he'd caught a concert of ours in Leucadia last summer, but he'd been unable to drop backstage and see us due to a previous commitment. He asked about Mike and Liam, and I told him in as few words as I could, feeling Justin stiffen next to me. I took her hand. Brewster nodded sadly and scratched his head.

"I know. I lost a lot of folks myself. Don't know why they didn't come after me. Either couldn't find me or didn't know I was alive in the first place."

"What brings you to L.A.?"

"Winter," he said, accepting a beer from Jimmy. "I was in Bellingham-Seattle, doing a little local organizing. It's cold up there."

"Isn't that awfully dangerous?" Justin asked.

"Cold?"

"No, organizing."

"Not so much as you'd think. The Arkies don't seem to mind it. Guess they figure it keeps us occupied, no pun intended. We're putting together community centers, to spread the burdens out now that things are rougher."

We talked for a while and the beer flowed. Brewster had hooked a ride over from the Glendale Yard after coming in on a southbound freight. We offered him a place to stay, which he accepted, saying he'd like to help out with getting a community center going in Pasadena. We figured that, with a few concerts and a little luck, we'd all make it through the winter.

We played together that evening and at several informal gigs that season, as well as every time we went to the Loch. Phil had no family in L.A., but lots of friends, and we never lacked for company or a hand at getting things done. The community center opened, staggered to its feet and survived, and with the help of the Arkie dole, we managed to keep most folks together that winter. It wasn't so easy in the colder climates, but L.A. was almost pleasant. Not even much smog, to speak of. Industry was doing a lot of retooling to meet Arkie demands, and not many people had the money or connections to get away

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with much unnecessary driving. We usually had to carpool up to the pub or not go, though Brewster was always able to scrounge up the needed gas coupon somewhere, and Justin's old van held a lot of people. There was even talk of relaying the old trolley rails, as the first of the new fusion plants was scheduled to go on-line that summer. That meant no more power shortages, so electric railways would become feasible. That tickled Brewster, who was a train nut.

Those days Justin and I did most of our talking late at night, in bed, listening through the wall to Phil snoring softly. Occasionally he'd bring home some sweet young thing and the nights would get noisier, though Phil knew that Justin disapproved of this and he kept it to a minimum. I once asked her, as lightly as I could, if she was jealous, but she replied that it would have been a lot better for Phil to settle down and, if not marry, at least set up housekeeping with a good woman while he still could.

"He's getting old, babe," she said to me one night. "It's starting to tell on him. He's not going to be riding the trains forever."

"He's talking about heading up to Denver when the snows melt."

She shook her head. "He shouldn't go."

"He's a hobo," I said. I felt her shiver and slipped an arm around her slight, bare shoulders. We'd both lost weight that winter. "Hoboes go."

"You've heard his songs. You know what happens to old hoboes."

"So does he, Justin. He knows. He made his choices, just like we did, and I've never heard him express a regret."

She looked at me. The electricity was off, but there was enough moon for me to see those dark eyes I'd fallen in love with that first night at the Ness. Or maybe before. Maybe I'd always been in love with her. "How about you? Any regrets? Things could have been better, I suppose. I could have..."

She gripped me fiercely. "You've been as good to me as any man could. We've been as happy as I could have wanted. Nothing else, none of it, not the Arkies or anything, has changed that."

"Even if I didn't tip?"

She laughed. "You always returned service for service. Come here."

"I love you."

"And I love you."

It was the last time we ever made love.

I gazed down into the waters of the creek, watching the moon-pooled reflection drifting between my knees. How long ago was it that I had lived that life? And now? The little shanties crowded down to the banks of the stream, each one with its quota of stone-silent men, its tangle of choked-off emotions and dying memories. A harmonica wailed and faded down toward the tracks. Laughter surged from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a group of huddled figures in the dirty cedars. A light burned in the admiral's shack. Fat crickets buzzed.

I let the cold in, numbing me, shutting down my thoughts, willing the uncaring to start, when a shadow cut across the moon. Mose was looking down at me. We stayed that way for a long time, him saying nothing, me waiting for him to go away — but he remained, like a rock.

"Mose."

Mose nodded, turning a large dark silhouette over in his hands, his head bowed in what I finally realized was embarrassment. Before I could speak...

"P'fesser, I thought you might feel better if'n y'had somethin' t' play."

He set the violin case on my knees in such a way that I would have to take it or it would have slid into the water. I tried to speak, but he was gone. My hands gripped the case tightly, the fingers numb and deathly cold.

It was an open-air concert on the lawn of the old Green Hotel to raise money for the Pasadena Transient Hostel. A perfect Saturday, May balmy with a sea breeze. Phil, Justin, and I had made it a reasonably regular affair in one of the local parks or malls, and people understood, came and helped. They were learning how to pull together. A local banjo-mandolin duo started us off, then we came on with a mixture of Scottish, Irish, and western songs, including some of Phil's. We were just getting into the second set when a pair of National Guard trucks rolled up on Raymond and stopped. They were big canvasbacked four-by-fours, and their arrival was nothing special. Guard trucks were the primary means of delivery for everything from food to hard coal those days. But, after a moment's conversation with the policeman on duty, they bumped over the curb and moved slowly toward the stage, parting the little crowd. We stopped playing.

"I think it's a bust," Phil whispered. I wasn't so sure. Justin moved over to stand between us, and I suddenly realized how exposed we were up there. The trucks pulled up to the north end of the stage and stopped. I remember that the driver of the lead truck was a dumb-looking blond kid with glasses, chewing a wad of gum. It was a small detail but one of the ones that stuck, like Justin's flowered dress or Phil's ancient road shoes or the cough I had picked up that morning. They all form a picture that hasn't yet started to fade.

The trucks stopped. The passenger-side door of the lead truck opened and a familiar figure got out.

"Jim?"

Lieutenant Colonel Honeyman nodded shyly. "Rich, Justin ... Phil Brewster, right?"

"Yeah," Brewster replied flatly.

"I like your music."

"Thanks, General. I like your truck."

Honeyman nodded absently, then gestured to a sweating noncom who

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had moved forward to stand beside the cab. The sergeant ran back, bawling at his men to strip the canopy off the truck. I could tell that Justin was starting a slow burn and slipped my arm around her. "Easy, babe."

"Yeah."

"What's this all about?" from Brewster.

"Sorry to interrupt, but my employer wanted to hear some of your music for himself ... in person. I hope you don't mind," he added lamely. "Orders." There was an edge to his voice, almost a pleading, that scared me, and I drew Justin closer. Brewster just stood quietly, leaning gently on the neck of his guitar, scratching his stubbled chin.

Some of the soldiers fanned out around the crowd while the others worked loose the tie-downs and flipped back the tarp. There was a collective gasp from the crowd.

The truckbed was occupied by an Arkie. It stood there, shining softly yellow in the sunlight, its small tentacles moving lazily in the air, like the fins of a drifting fish. The crowd backed away, and there were a few loud exclamations before things settled down. We had, all of us, seen Arkies by this time, but not in the flesh.

The creature raised a long tentacle with a small lighted box to its manipular cluster and began to tap rapidly on the keys.

"Hit wo-ood p-lee-sus to he-ar yur myu-sich," the box intoned, much like an electric organ.

"I'll be damned," Phil murmured. Honeyman was looking expectantly toward us.

"We ha-ferd mush uf yur fo-luk i-de-om. We wo-ood he-ar uf hit in per-son, p-lee-z."

"We?"

"Collective intelligence, maybe," I muttered. It seemed possible.

"Either that, or it's a pope. Shall we play for it?" The Arkie stood waiting, tentacle poised expectantly.

"We have a choice?"

Brewster gave me a hard look and said, "We always have a choice. Justin?" She nodded, tight-lipped.

"Let's play."

We started out slowly with "City of New Orleans" and "Muhlenberg County," then jumped into a set of fiddle-clog instrumentals. Then, as was our custom, we took turns picking the songs. Justin chose "Nevada Jane" and I picked "Starlight on the Rails." Phil, probably feeling boxed in by his own music, led off on "Wabash Cannonball," but he couldn't stop us from segueing into his own "Tolono." We finished up with "Rent Strike Rag."

We got a good, but guarded, response from the crowd and soldiers, then silence. We stood there, waiting for some hint that the Arkie had heard or understood or was finished with us. Anything, I thought, just go away. Honeyman glanced nervously at it, then at us, and was about to speak when it again raised the voder box.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Thet was mos en-joy-ya-bull. You haf a faz-na-shun wis rall-rods. Why iss thiz."

There was no interrogative tone, but we understood. Phil stepped forward. He'd spent a lifetime in union struggles, meeting halls, and confrontations and was more glib than Justin or me. He smiled, disarmingly.

"I guess it's because they recall a happier time for us. Trains are noisy and massive but graceful and totally human. We humans tend to be sentimental about those things that mirror our own strengths and weaknesses, especially if we created them ourselves."

The Arkie digested this silently, then raised the box again.

"You will p-lee-z play for uz now a song uf la-burr an pro-tess. P-lee-z," it repeated.

Phil looked at us and shrugged, then began to go through the motions of tuning. Whether he was stalling for time or merely thinking, I do not know. I felt cold. The sunlight was falling harshly across the lines of the Green Hotel: a slanting, late-afternoon sun.

"Rich?" Justin was looking at me with concern.

"Uh, yeah?"

"I thought you might be leaving your body. Drifting off, you know?" She smiled. I nodded and kissed her cheek.

"Right here, babe," I murmured, raising the violin to my shoulder. Phil led us into "Pie in the Sky," then "Union Maid," and the audience was with us all the way. That kind of electricity you used to be able to feel at a rock concert or a club where there was a good chance it was going to be closed down, walking the edge with police in the wings, waiting for a dirty word or a political reference or a call to disobedience. The soldiers faded in and out at the perimeter, caught on the wrong side while Honeyman, his face a white mask, stood watching the great immobile Arkie.

It gave no sign when we finished. Phil stepped forward and mugged a smile, but the Arkie did not raise its voder. Phil unshipped his guitar and set it down. With a look toward us as if to say "Here we go," he cleared his throat.

"This next song is best done unaccompanied, by as many people as possible, as loud as possible. Now you probably all know the tune. It's set to 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus,' and when the last line come around, I want you to all sing real loud."

He leaned over and whispered, "Heads up, kids. Word change in the tag line." We nodded. The sunlight lay across the stage now in icy strips.

Are you cold, forlorn, and hungry?
Are there lots of things you lack?
Is your life made up of mis'ry?
Then dump the Arkies off your back!

Phil grinned at the startled re-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sponse as we pressed on.

Are your clothes all torn and tattered?
Are you living in a shack?
Would you have your troubles scattered?
Then dump the Arkies off your back!

This time we had them. I glanced at the Arkie. The body was still, but this time the sensory tentacles were alert and moving. Honeyman motioned, trying to catch our attention, as the Arkie raised its voder.

Are you almost split asunder?
Loaded like a long-eared jack?
Boob, why don't you buck like thunder?
And dump the Arkies off your back!

There was shrill whistle, so shrill it hurt the ears, coming from the voder box. When we stopped, the Arkie turned off the box and stood, regarding us, though in what way I don't know. It was all silence. The other two long tentacles waved sinuously in the air.

"A Cal-cal-ate-ed in-sult," it tapped. "We brin pee-suh an an en to di-sees an war an you re-turn us tre-choo-ree."

"You bring us slavery and tyranny," Justin cried, stepping forward. "You take our freedom and you expect gratitude!" Instantly, the two long tentacles shot out and came to a stop a foot from her, moving dangerously. Justin froze. Before I could reach her, Phil had a hand on my arm.

"Careful. Don't startle it." The nearest tentacle was waving a few inches from her legs. I held still, caught up in love and pride and terror.

Honeyman turned to the Arkie. "No, don't! She's young. She didn't mean it. I'll vouch for her...."

"Si-lenz. Yez, you are co-reck. You are the sla-vuhs, we are the mas-tuhs." One tentacle probed delicately an inch from her shoe, the other waved menacingly at us. "You mus be taud thad sla-vuhs do not cri-tee-sahs thee-air mas-tuhs. Sla-vuhs are pro-per-tee, to be dis-pose uf as we so choos."

The tentacle coiled around Justin's ankle, and she screamed, falling back. I caught her as Phil fended off the other tentacle with his guitar, and pulled her away from the alien. She looked up at me once, then closed her eyes.

I know I must have said something as I put my arms around her and waited for the thing to take me too, but instead there came a series of loud reports. Honeyman was standing, his pistol gripped in both hands, firing shot after shot into the creature's braincap. As chunks of the yellowish flesh erupted outward, the Arkie threw out a tentacle and took off Jim Honeyman's head.

"Holy Christ, Rich, come on. We've got to get out of here." I heard more gunfire and felt something tugging at my sleeve. Justin was lying peacefully in my arms. "Rich, now!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Quick, before the cops get here." I lifted Justin gently in my arms. I remember how light she seemed.

The moonlight cast a shadow of the violin case on the stream as I sat there, my shoe tips in the water. Mose had faded away as quietly as he'd come, leaving me alone at the end of the valley.

What was the point of remembering, if it only hurt, if it changed nothing? I looked at the case. It had a little tarnished brass plate set in the lid, and my fingers traced the name. It was my own. Inside was the old Guarnerius. Slowly, wonderingly, I took it out and touched the taut strings. It was in tune.

A soft guitar chord sounded and I looked up. Sitting on the hill opposite were Liam and Betty and Jimmy. Jimmy silently raised his glass toward me. Behind them were Mike McIntosh and Jim Honeyman.

"Nothing stops the music," I whispered.

"It sure don't," Phil drawled softly, perched atop a stream-surrounded rock in the moonlight. I sat, motionless, frozen, afraid to move and break the dream. Justin laid her head on my shoulder.

"I missed you."

"I've always been with you," she said softly, looking up at me. "Play for me?"

"All right."

She leaned up and kissed me once, softly. I opened my eyes.

I was alone in the moonlight, except only Mose, who stood a few yards away, staring at the ground. I took up the old violin.

"Mose."

"Ummm?"

"You got your mouth harp?" He held it up.

"You know 'Goodnight Lovin' Trail'?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy & Science Fiction

MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. 1983 catalog $1.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

SCIENTIFANTASY SPECIALIST: Books, magazines. 20¢ stamp for catalog. Gerry de la Ree, Cedarwood, Saddle River, NJ 07458.

BACK ISSUES of Science Fiction and Fantasy magazines are our specialty. Send for free catalog. Overseas requests welcome. Also, highest prices paid for collections, large or small. Ray Bowman, Box 5845F, Toledo, Ohio 43613.

SOFT BOOKS, 89 Marion Street, Toronto, Canada M6R 1E6. Howard Lovecraft, Arkham, Necronomicon, etc. bought/sold. Catalogues issued.

SEND 25¢ FOR CATALOG of Scientifantasy books & pulps. Canford, Drawer 216, Freeville, NY 13068.

NEW INDISPENSABLE BOOK for mystery readers. Free Brochure. Sensational Christmas gift too. Jo Jan, Box 202, Santa Ana, Calif. 92702.

"SEE THROUGH PEOPLE!" Stop deceivers! 50 Protections! Enjoy love! $1. NEWLIFE, Box 275-SV, Boulder City, Nevada 89005.

SPACE AND TIME — award winning fantasy magazine. $4. 138 W. 70th Street (4-B), New York, NY 10023. Mention F&SF.

MAGAZINES WANTED. Amazing Stories. April, May, June, July, August 1926; March, September 1927; June 1928; August 1931; February 1932. Amazing Stories Quarterly: Fall 1930; Spring-Summer 1933; Fall 1934. Science Wonder Stories; February 1930. R.D. Mullen, 228 South 24th Street, Tere Haute, Indiana 47803.

HARDCOVER SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY. Reasonable Prices. Free Lists. Norman Syms, 8 Broadmoor Vale, Upper Weston, Bath, Avon, England BA1 4LP.

SPECULATIVE FICTION MISCELLANY. Annotated catalog. Write DMK BOOKS, 22946. Brenford, Woodland Hills, CA 91364.

URGENTLY NEEDED: SCIENCE FICTION. Highest prices paid. Fantasy Archives, 71 8th Ave., NY, NY 10014.

JESUS FICTIONAL! Positive Proof Flavius Josephus created Jesus, authored Gospels. Scholarly booklet: $3.00 — Vector, Box 6215-B, Bellevue, WA 98007.

FOREIGN EDITIONS OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. Copies of French, German, Spanish, Japanese and Swedish editions available at $2.50 each, three for $7.00. Mercury Press, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY Catalog. O-P 1st Edition Hardcovers. OTHERWORLDS, 23834 Wendover, Beachwood, OH 44122.

BOUGHT, SOLD, TRADED, SF&F hardbounds, pulps, digests. Send 2 stamps for gigantic 15,000 item catalog. Graham Holroyd, 778 Spencerport Rd., Rochester, NY 14606.

MOONSTONE BOOKCELLARS, INC. 2145 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20037. (202) 659-2600. Science Fiction, Fantasy and Mysteries. Special Orders Welcome!

OUT-OF-PRINT Books Found. Send Wants. Booklook, Dept. F, 51 Maple Ave., Warwick, NY 10990.

Do you have something to advertise to sf readers? Books, magazines, typewriters, telescopes, computers, space-drives, or misc. Use the F&SF Market Place at these low, low rates: $7.50 for minimum of ten (10) words, plus 75 cents for each additional word. Frequency discount: 10% for six consecutive insertions, 15% for twelve consecutive insertions. Send copy and remittance to: Adv. Dept., Fantasy and Science Fiction, P.O. Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLOTHING

F&SF T-SHIRTS. Navy blue with original magazine logo imprinted in white OR: Red shirt with blue logo. Sm, med, large, extra-large. $6.50 each. Mercury Press, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

MISCELLANEOUS

ESP LABORATORY. This new research service *group can help you. For FREE information write:* Al G. Manning, ESP Laboratory, 7559 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90046.

REVOLUTIONARY HYPERDRIVE TECHNOLOGY! Fact! Not fiction! Free details. ARD-1, Box 323, CDA, ID 83814.

INVENTIONS, ideas, technology wanted! Industry presentation/national exposition. 1-800-538-6050. X831.

PERSONAL

FAITHFUL ORIENTAL Wives. Cherry Blossoms, Box 1021-FS, Honokaa, Hawaii 96727.

LONELY? Nationwide club for both sexes. Send stamp. Exciting, Box 324, Ontario, Calif. 91761.

JAPANESE GIRLS make wonderful wives. Let us introduce you to an unspoiled Oriental beauty. $2 brings photos, descriptions, application. Japan International, Box 156-FSF, Carnelian Bay, CA 95711.

SINGLE? Meet that special person! Call DATELINE — free: 800-451-3245.

RECORDS/TAPES

GREAT RADIO PROGRAMS! Science-Fiction, Mystery, Adventure. Free list cassettes. Rare Radio, Box 117-F, Sunland, Calif. 91040.

Collector's Items — Special Offer

We have very limited quantities of the following special back issues, which we offer at the below prices for as long as they last:

SPECIAL DAMON KNIGHT ISSUE (November 1976) — featuring a short story, "I See You" by Knight and an appreciation by Theodore Sturgeon.

28th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE (October 1977) — Robert Bloch, John Brunner, Samuel R. Delany, James Tiptree, Jr., Clifford Simak, Zenna Henderson, Michael Bishop, Manly Wade Wellman.

SPECIAL ALL BRITISH ISSUE (April 1978) — Brian W. Aldiss, Ian Watson, Robert Aickman, Richard Cowper, Christopher Priest, Kenneth Bulmer, Keith Roberts, John Brunner.

Send $2.50 for each issue or $6.00 for all three (includes postage and handling) to: Mercury Press, Inc. Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SPECIAL CHRISTMAS RATES

THE MAGAZINE OF **Fantasy & Science Fiction**

$15.00 for the first one-year subscription

$12.00 for each additional one-year subscription

Send Fantasy and Science Fiction as a Christmas gift:

(PLEASE PRINT)

To _____
Name of Recipient

Street _____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____

(PLEASE PRINT)

To _____
Name of Recipient

Street _____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____

11-82

☐ I enclose $_____

☐ Bill me after Christmas

Enter my own subscription

☐ New

☐ Renewal

Foreign and Canadian postage: $3.00 per year.

My name_____

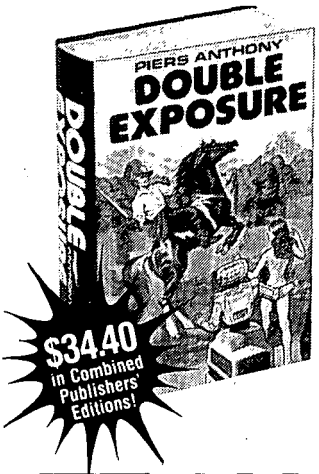
Street _____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____

Mercury Press, Inc.
P.O. Box 56
Cornwall, Ct. 06753

Gift cards will be sent to you, for you to personalize with your own signature.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



YOURS FREE WITH MEMBERSHIP DOUBLE EXPOSURE

Giant 790-page 3-in-1 volume brings you *Split Infinity*, *Blue Adept*, and *Juxtaposition*.

0828 Pub.ed.$14.50

0158 Illustrated. Pub.ed.$11.95

1875 Pub.ed.$16.95

*0521 Pub.ed.$17.50

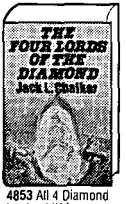
0182 Spec.ed.

*0208 Pub.ed.$15.95

7005 Spec.ed.

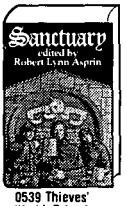
1735 Spec.ed.

4721 Pub.ed.$14.95



4853 All 4 Diamond books: **Lilith, Cerberus, Charon,** and **Medusa.** Spec.ed.

2618 Spec.ed.



0539 **Thieves' World; Tales from the Vulgar Unicorn; Shadows of Sanctuary.** Spec.ed.

And take any 4 for $1 WITH MEMBERSHIP

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR ADDITIONAL SELECTIONS.

Note: Prices shown are publishers' edition prices.
***Explicit scenes and/or language may be offensive to some.**

How the Club works:

You'll receive your choice of any 4 books for only $1 (plus shipping and handling) and a free copy of *Double Exposure* after your application for membership is accepted. We reserve the right to reject any application. However, once accepted as a member, you may examine the books in your home and, if not completely satisfied, return them within 10 days at Club expense. Your membership will be cancelled and you'll owe nothing. The FREE book will be yours to keep whether or not you remain a member.

About every 4 weeks (14 times a year), we'll send you the Club's bulletin, *Things to Come*, describing the 2 coming Selections and a variety of Alternate choices. In addition, up to 4 times a year you may receive offers of special Selections, always at low Club prices. If you want the 2 Selections, you need do nothing; they'll be shipped automatically.

If you don't want a Selection, prefer an Alternate, or no book at all, just fill out the convenient form always provided and return it to us by the date specified.

We allow you at least 10 days for making your decision. If you do not receive the form in time to respond within 10 days and receive an unwanted Selection, you may return it at our expense.

As a member you need take only 4 Selections or Alternates during the coming year. You may resign any time thereafter or continue to enjoy Club benefits for as long as you wish. One of the 2 Selections each month is only $3.98. Other Selections are higher, but always much less than hardcover publishers' editions—up to 65% off. A shipping and handling charge is added to all shipments. Send no money now, but do mail the coupon today!

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB®

Dept. ER-301, Garden City, N.Y. 11530

I want the best SF in or out of this world! Please accept my application for membership in the Science Fiction Book Club. Send me the 4 books whose numbers I have indicated in the boxes below plus my FREE book and bill me just $1 (plus shipping and handling). I agree to the Club Plan as described in this ad. I will take 4 more books at regular low Club prices in the coming year and may resign any time thereafter. The FREE book will be mine to keep whether or not I remain a member. SFBC offers serious works for mature readers.

FREE BOOK #5637	1.	2.	3.	4.

Mr.
Ms. _____
(Please print)

Address _____ Apt. # _____

City _____

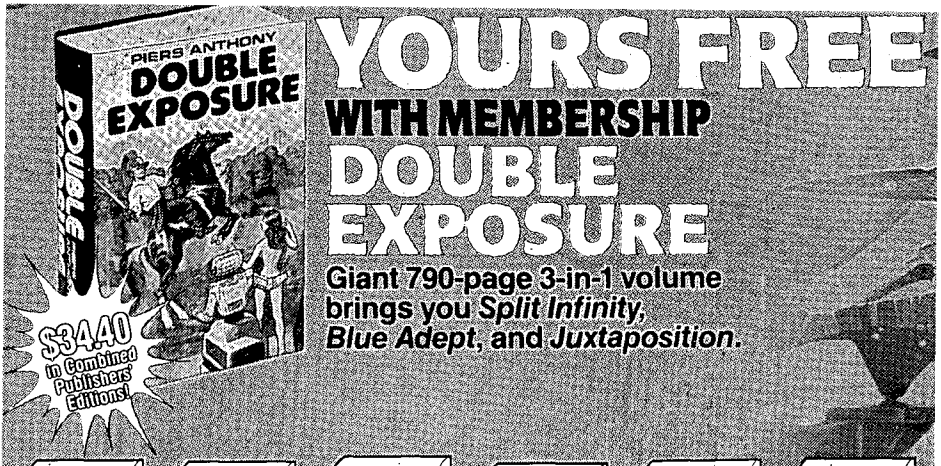
State _____ Zip _____

If under 18 parent must sign _____

The Science Fiction Book Club offers complete hardbound editions sometimes altered in size to fit special presses and save you even more. Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members will be serviced from Canada. Offer slightly different in Canada.

50-S265A

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



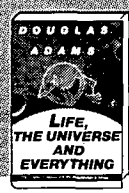
YOURS FREE WITH MEMBERSHIP DOUBLE EXPOSURE

Giant 790-page 3-in-1 volume brings you *Split Infinity*, *Blue Adept*, and *Juxtaposition*.

*4200 Pub.ed.$16.00

2592 Pub.ed.$15.95

7328 Pub.ed.$15.95



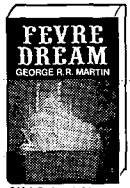
2980 Pub.ed.$9.95

0497 Nonfiction. Pub.ed.$14.95

*6262 Pub.ed.$14.95

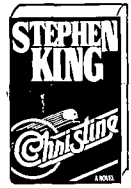
4994 Pub.ed.$19.95

†2295 Spec.ed.

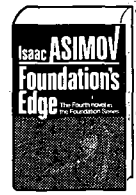


8136 Pub.ed.$14.95

0166 Pub.ed.$16.95

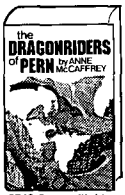


0471 Pub.ed.$16.95



5561 Pub.ed.$14.95

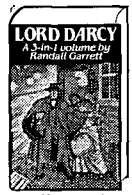
0190 Farthest Star; Wall Around A Star. Spec.ed.



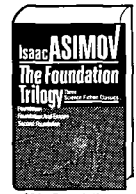
2543 Dragonflight; Dragonquest; The White Dragon. Comb.pub.ed. $26.85

1958 Twelve Fair Kingdoms; The Grand Jubilee; And Then There'll Be Fireworks. Comb. pub.ed.$31.85

*0216 Pub.ed.$15.95



7799 Murder and Magic; Too Many Magicians; Lord Darcy Investigates. Spec.ed.



6221 Foundation; Foundation and Empire; Second Foundation. Pub.ed.$17.95

AND TAKE ANY 4 FOR $1

WITH MEMBERSHIP

See other side for coupon and additional Selections.

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB®

†TM & © 1983 Lucasfilm Ltd. (LFL)

Note: Prices shown are publishers' edition prices.

*Explicit scenes and/or language may be offensive to some

50-S265/

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED